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B.K.'s Story: His Path to Becoming an Inner-City Custodial Father

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Abstract

African American males are regularly cast as deadbeat dads and non-contributors to family life. However, a growing literature has been documenting that African American males do contribute in many ways, including as custodial fathers. 5% of African American children live in single-parent father-only households. This paper presents B.K.'s story which describes his overcoming drug abuse and his becoming a custodial father. His story illustrates the powerful contribution African American males can make in their families and thereby in their communities. His story also describes how social outreach sustained him during his most troubled periods and supported his path to responsibility.

Keywords

Fatherhood; Parenting; Family; Crack cocaine

Introduction

The official statistics regarding males' involvement in poor African American families strongly suggest that their involvement has been decreasing dramatically. The Current Population Survey has clearly documented a decline in two-parent households among African Americans (US Bureau of the Census 2008). In 2006, about a third (35%) of African American children lived with both of their parents. Extensive research generally attributes the decline in marriage among African Americans to a decline in the number of eligible African American males due to death, imprisonment and limited economic prospects (Lichter et al. 2003; Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1995; Wilson 1996). In 2006, more than half (51%) of African American children were living with their mother only (US Bureau of the Census 2008). The crack epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s contributed heavily to these conditions further destabilizing many African American families (Dunlap et al. 2006, 2000; Minkler and Roe 1993). Due to involvement in the crack cocaine lifestyle with its attendant demands on time and finances, many parents—both fathers and mothers—became unable to look after their children. This period saw a rise in the no-parent household where growing numbers of African American children ended up with grandparents, caring aunts, in foster care, and in group homes.

Despite the official declines in two-parent households, African American males have remained active in raising children in a variety of alternative roles (Connor and White 2006; Dunlap et al. 2008; Furstenberg 1995; Jarrett, Roy and Burton 2002; Jayakody and Kalil

2002): as non-resident fathers; as involved kin (such as uncles); as “old heads” that provide guidance and direction to youths in the community; and often as social fathers that reside with a family, maintain an intimate relationship with the mother, and parent any children present in the household. Additionally, many African American fathers have taken full responsibility for their children when the biological mother was no longer present or no longer able to be a responsible parent. As of 2006, 5% of African American children lived with their father only (US Bureau of the Census 2008). These highly responsible African American fathers stand in strong counterpoint to other images of African American males as players, drug addicts, criminals, deadbeat dads, and as adults generally unwilling to be involved with parenting (Anderson 1999; Liebow 1967).

The existence and involvement of responsible males presents an important existing and possibly expandable resource for African American children, especially those in difficult economic and social circumstances. Several authors have discussed the symbolic interactionism that can transform African American males into caring fathers (Florsheim and Ngu 2006; Roy 2006). Hamer and Marchioro (2002) analyzed the process of becoming a custodial dad, based on in-depth interviews with 24 low-income African American fathers. They found that most of the fathers had not planned on single parenting, but were compelled into the role by the mother’s withdrawal from full-time parenting. These fathers struggled with uncertainty about what to do, earning sufficient money, juggling their work and family responsibilities, and arranging support from family and friends using a “kinscription” process more often associated with poor African American single mothers (Roy and Burton 2007; Stack and Burton 1993). Hamer and Marchioro (2002, p. 126) reported that for these males, their role as fathers became the most important thing in their life and a source of great satisfaction and joy:

Despite their initial reluctance to assume full-time parenting, all of these fathers grew to enjoy the role. “It’s not something I would have chose for myself,” said one 26-year-old father, “but it’s the best part of who I am today.”

These sentiments parallel those expressed by low-income mothers raising children on their own. Edin and Kefalas (2005, p. 183–184), concluded their ethnographic study of 162 low income females by affirming the positive transformative process associated with becoming a full-time single parent:

[We, Edin and Kefalas,] can now identify the one question we asked that proved most revealing: “What would your life be like without children?” We assumed this question would prompt stories of regret over opportunities lost and ambitions foiled.... Instead, mothers repeatedly offered refrains like... these: “I’d be dead or in jail,” “I’d be in the streets,” “I wouldn’t care about anything,” “My child saved me,” and “It’s only because of my children that I’m where I am today.” For all but a few, becoming a mother was a profound turning point that “saved” or “rescued” them from a life either leading nowhere or going very wrong....

[T]hey use motherhood as a way to make meaning in a void. Their life stories are testimonials to motherhood’s transformative influence, leading them to abandon their “drinking and drugging,” to trade a wild life for one spent at home, to return to school, pursue employment, reconnect with family, and to find a new sense of hope and purpose.

This paper presents an extended case study of B.K., an African American male who came from a broken home, become heavily involved with crack cocaine during the height of its frenzied use, but later found the strength and skills to be a responsible custodial father. The discussion summarizes some of the key elements that went wrong in his life and highlights programs that supported his positive development.

Methods

This paper presents the life history of B.K., a pseudonym he chose while participating in the *Transient Domesticity & Violence in Distressed Households* project funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse. The project was designed to provide qualitative insights into the processes behind and experiences of transient domesticity within economically distressed African American households where children and illegal drug use are present. From April 2004 to April 2006, the project recruited 105 focal subjects from high poverty neighborhoods in New York City. Field staff approached contacts from previous studies, used snowball techniques, and met others by participating in the life of the community.

Focal subjects were chosen to represent multiple social networks as well as a range of ages, family compositions and experiences typical of the inner city. Subjects were required to meet various study criteria. Each subject had to be involved in a female–male live-in partnership and at least one partner had to have custody of a child. Focal subjects had to self-identify as either black or African American. Lastly, someone in the household (not necessarily either of the partners) had to be involved with regular use of an illegal drug. Once selected, field staff obtained informed consent from each participant.

When he entered the study, B.K. was 48 years old and living with his wife and three daughters in the East Flatbush section of Brooklyn. B.K. was one of eight (8%) of the study subjects that happened to be married. The project found that marriage was not generally a requirement for cohabiting nor having children together. Both B.K. and his wife were in recovery from years of crack use. B.K.'s wife had recently relapsed to crack use.

Field staff engaged in an omnibus ethnography by embedding themselves into the study households and directly observing the evolution and interconnection of events for up to 5 years. Hence, the data obtained regarding relationships and parenting were not just interview responses. Field staff directly observed subjects like B.K. as they interacted with their children and engaged in their household chores. Semi-structured interviews were held periodically to assure coverage of key topics and to obtain direct quotes regarding subjects' experiences as they understood them and in their own words. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Survey responses and field observations were maintained in FileMaker Pro for subsequent analysis.

Findings

B.K. was born in Bushwick section of Brooklyn in 1956. He was the middle child of three boys. All of them developed substance abuse problems as adults. As of 2007, his older brother is an alcoholic. His younger brother had a long history of drug abuse and was found dead in the Hudson River in 1996. The authorities were unable to determine the specific cause of death due to the decayed condition of the body. To B.K.'s credit, he was able to get his life together after heavy involvement with illegal drugs. Beyond that, he was able to take responsibility for raising three children. This is his story.

Early Childhood

B.K. was born into what would structurally appear to have been a stable household. He lived with both his biological parents and siblings in Brooklyn. Both of his parents worked full time. His father was a shipping clerk. His mother worked for the New York City Agency for Child Development. But this early experience was far from idyllic. B.K.'s father was overbearing and mentally abusive to his mother, to him and to his brothers. His father would constantly berate his mother. He demanded that she stay home all the time and would not

allow her to visit friends and family. B.K. reported that he felt his mother suffered greatly from this treatment:

[Deborah (the interviewer): How did your father treat your mother?] B.K.: He was very abusive. Mentally abusive. Not so much physical. Mentally abusive. He would uhm, beat her up mentally. You know, he would berate her. He would, uhm, say she wasn't no good. Just, you know, make her just feel really bad.... She was scared of my father. She, uhm, she explained to me at times she couldn't even go out to see her friends. She basically had no friends. Uhm, he would want her home all the time. I think she was really afraid. You know, she might of-she-she could qualify as a-as uhmm—how do you call it?—battered woman syndrome. Whatever, from what I know about battered woman syndrome. She basically—she might not had of got physically hit all the time. But she was getting beat up.

That said, B.K.'s mother did not try to shield the kids from an abusive father; rather, she was a very strict parent:

My mother was too strict.... [She] wouldn't allow us to do anything. Way too strict.... She wouldn't let us play. In other words, I got this-this one picture in my mind of standing in front of the building with my brother's. And, we were out there playing with two girls who was jumping rope. And, we had a ball. We were playing ball. My moth-my mother would come out and-and make us stop.... Even when I grew up and I moved in with my mother, she wouldn't let me watch TV pass a certain hour. You know. I mean she was strict about everything. You know. When I was eatin', she would only-whatever she fixed me on that plate. It wasn't no seconds. (Deborah laughing). I'm a growing boy.

B.K. reported that his parents separated when he was about 8 years old. Shortly after their separation B.K.'s father obtained a summons from the courts that deemed his mother incompetent to raise her children. By this time, she had become an alcoholic. His father placed B.K. and his brothers in a Catholic home on Long Island. B.K. and his brothers were to spend the remainder of their childhood in a series of group homes.

Group Home Life

B.K. remembers the powerful trauma of being separated from his parents. The separation left him feeling more alone in the world. After placing them in the group home his father abandoned them. There was no contact from him. Yet, his mother visited him and his brothers often in the group homes. His mother would take B.K. (but not his brothers) on day trips and then she would bring him back. B.K. reported that he did not know why his mother did not take his brothers on their outings and that he had never thought to ask her about it.

Overall, B.K. had mostly good memories of growing up in group homes. He reported that one home had a big swimming pool, hills, horses, and apple trees. Across the street, there were woods where the group went camping every day and watched deer. At another group home, he lived near the beach, where he would spend time. At the group homes, he had opportunities to play numerous sports through every season: football, baseball, basketball. He also learned to play the trumpet and performed in the group home's band.

On the other hand, he learned to watch out for himself. There were often fights or the threat of fights in the group home. B.K. reported that he looked out for himself and took on the additional responsibility of looking out for his brothers:

I was the one watching over my brother's. All through the-through the system. You know, they were both smaller than me. They weren't, you know, aggressive like I

was. I-I wouldn't, you know, take nothing from nobody. I would defend them all the time.

There were also a few occasions when he was abused by the staff. B.K. reported an occasion when he was hit very hard by a counselor:

While I was in the boy's home, I got slapped across the face so hard. 'Til today, I still feel it. I'll never forget that. And I'll never forget the counselor that did it.... Man. This man, the way he did it. Maybe it's the way he did it. Because he approached me calmly. He was talking about something we did. I think we-my first experience with alcohol. We went out and got-brought a quarter of beer or something. Me and one of the other guy's in the group home.... [I was] 14. And, I'm on the top bunk. And, he comes to me. And, I'm still clouded from the drinking. And, he's talking to me all soft-all soft. The next thing I know WHACK! Right across my face. Never forget that!.... I cried. But I was in shock. I was in shock. I never thought this man would hit me. You know. Because there was-it was such a loving group home.... Okay. He was the head counselor. And uhm, it was like a family. It's just you know, they were white [both laugh] and we were black. [Both laughing] But you know that's the way-that's the way it was.

[Deborah: Aside from him slapping you, were there other punishments?] Uhm, just taking away privileges. You know, no allowance if you did anything wrong. Uhm, nothing really bad. You know, maybe extra study time. Cause see, they were developing us to move out into the world. So, we had to do like if-if punishment to me was like good. Because I-I would study. You know. And then like okay, you have to study an extra hour reading and stuff like that. You know, so it helped me in the long run.

Another time, he was nearly sexually abused by one of the staff at the group home. A coach had invited him and a group of other young boys over to his room to watch television. It was supposed to be a special treat. However, while B.K. was sitting on the floor in front of the coach, B.K. could feel the coach's hands on him. B.K. got up and left, knowing that what was going on was inappropriate. He stated that, "I knew what was next if I didn't leave." He never went back but heard that this coach had acted inappropriately with some of the other boys too.

Graduation

At sixteen (nearly seventeen), with a high school diploma in hand, B.K. was ready to move out of the juvenile system. The group home contacted both his parents and he ended up moving back in with his mother in Brooklyn. B.K. reported that his mother had serious problems with alcohol and violence:

My mother always cursed me out.... My mother was drunk. When I-like when I got reconnected with my mother at the age of 16, she was an alcoholic then. Her boyfriend, he was an enabler. He was the type thing as long as she gets what she wants, he just was glad to be there. You know. So he enabled her basically to do whatever she was doing. Uhm, they cursed at each other. They fought with each other. He got cut. You know. He wouldn't-he wouldn't hit her back cause my mother was such a small person. He wouldn't hit her back. But he got beat up bad. My mother was very abusive towards him.

[Deborah: Okay. And would you say that she was abusive to you?] To me? Just she used a lot of vulgar language. That's all. [Deborah: Did she ever beat you?] Nah. Nah. She tried. [Deborah: She did (laughing)]. She tried. Yeah I-she tried a few times. With a shoe one time. And you know, but this is, we gotta remember, when

I'm-I'm-I'm 16 going on 17. I'm trying to live with my mother and her purse is there. I wanna go out to the movies, you know what I'm saying. Yo, I took \$5 and when I got home I heard about it. You know what I'm saying. She came after me. You know, I deserved it.

B.K. reported that the living arrangement did not suit him or his mother. After only 2 months, he was thrown out of the household:

My mother was into her new found man. And, we basically did not get along. I was basically a rebel and I wanted to do what I wanted to do and my mother wasn't having it. And eventually I winded out-up-in the streets.

In an effort to support himself, B.K. applied for welfare. This is how he ended up moving from his mother's neighborhood in Brooklyn to the South Bronx, one of the toughest sections of New York City. He described his experiences with welfare:

[I was] in the streets at 17 (laughs). [I] tried to applied for welfare. [However, I went to] the wrong welfare center, because my mother worked for that welfare center (Deborah; laughing). And, I had no idea. And uhm, [I] moved to the Bronx and applied for welfare in the Bronx. Eventually, [I] got on welfare in the Bronx. Got a [rent-subsidized] apartment. And, where I just used it for a get high house. Actually, I would let people come in that used drugs, and that's-that was my-that's how I kept alive.

The lack of structure in his life was a major problem for B.K. He described how after leaving the discipline of the group home his life fell apart:

My childhood was good. You know. My childhood was kind of like shaky. Like when I was really young, before I got into the group homes, and into the institutions. And then after I got-when I first got out of the institutions, that's when it was-it got really rough..

This is when he learned that the social capital he had developed in the group home was not the same social capital he needed on the streets:

[Deborah: What did you learn about manhood while growing up?] Manhood? I don't think I learned that until act-actually after I was out in the streets on my own. You know? Throughout the age of 16, 17, uhm, I got involved with gangs. I got involved with, you know, drug dealing and stuff like that. You know, people in the streets. See, I was basically sheltered all my life. Coming through these homes and stuff, I was away from all of that. You know, I grew up...out there in Long Island. We-we-we went camping everyday (Deborah; laughing).... It was like a shock.. I was scared most of the time.... It just came. Even now I don't think I know about manhood. You know what I mean? Because I'm not that macho man type, you know what I'm saying. I'm a little soft, you know (Both laughing). I'm still a little soft. I don't mind admitting that I'm still a little soft. But, that's how I-that's how I was raised. You know?

Eventually he lost this apartment and began living on the streets again. He met a young deaf male and they became friends. This friend took him home with him and introduced him to his parents, both of whom were alcoholics. B.K. and his friend's mother almost immediately became intimate. B.K. stated that he let her have her way with him sexually because he needed a place to stay. Eventually, the relationship became mutual. She left her husband and got a place with B.K. They lived together as partners for almost 2 years. When that relationship ended, B.K. was homeless again. B.K. took to living from shelter to shelter and sleeping on the trains.

Work Life

In 1977 at age 21, B.K. secured employment with a city agency. In the early 1980s, he moved in with another female. They had a daughter together in 1982. During the 1980s, crack cocaine became the drug of choice for many in New York City (Golub and Johnson 1996). B.K. and his partner started smoking and soon were heavy users. However, when B.K.'s partner became pregnant with their next daughter in 1987, she re-evaluated her situation. As a result, she decided and was able to get clean. Meanwhile, B.K. continued to smoke crack. His old ways were incompatible with his partner's new lifestyle and growing family responsibilities, so she threw him out. Meanwhile, B.K. had been expanding his involvement with illegal hustles, even as he was still legally employed with a city agency. On the job, he would take numbers and sell marijuana. Word got out and eventually management stepped in. In 1989, they launched an investigation into B.K.'s drug dealing. B.K. resigned before he would have to face any criminal penalties.

After resigning from his job, B.K.'s drug use escalated, his life spiraled downhill and he became homeless. He lived from shelter to shelter (again) and did several stints in jail. Living in a shelter did not shelter residents from street life. Actually, the shelter was an extension of street life. Drug dealers would routinely come by and announce, "Who wants to work? Who wants to sell drugs for me?" The going rate was 75 dollars a day for selling drugs. One time, the NYPD's Tactical Narcotics Task (TNT) Force witnessed B.K. selling drugs. He was sentenced to 6 months in jail and 5 years probation.

B.K.'s life improved somewhat in 1995, after much of the most intense period of the crack epidemic had subsided (Curtis 1998; Johnson et al. 2006). That year, he was recruited by MTA Connections, a group that goes out on the subways to pick up homeless people. He was taken to a church where he was fed, allowed to wash and given clean clothes. A counselor with the program told him about a newly opened residential drug treatment program. B.K. went there, started the recovery process, and graduated from the program after 10 months. To maintain his newfound drug-free lifestyle, B.K. began attending Narcotics Anonymous meetings. There, he met his soon-to-be wife, who was also recovering from crack use and living in the shelter system. When she was approved for section eight housing in the South Bronx, he moved in with her.

Married Life

They moved in together, married, and both managed to remain drug and alcohol free, at least for the time. They found a two bedroom apartment in the East Flatbush section of Brooklyn, known for its heavy drug activity. In the process, B.K. took on the responsibilities of maintaining a house, building a career, and caring for children and eventually his ailing mother. Together, B.K. and his wife kept the apartment neat and clean. He found a job with a fast food chain doing the cleaning. He was proud to be working, took his work very seriously, and eventually worked his way up to the position of District Manager. B.K.'s wife—to-be had had seven children before they met, but only the youngest lived with her. The four oldest children lived with her mother in New Jersey. The next two children were taken down south by their biological father. She had no contact with them after that.

By 2003, B.K.'s life had come full circle. He had been clean and sober for 10 years, but his wife was relapsing. She had fallen into a self-destructive pattern of abuse and denial. She would go out on "a run," smoking crack for days during which time she would neither sleep nor eat very much. The peak of the crack epidemic had passed by the mid 1990s. However, some older users persisted with their habits for many years afterwards (Golub and Johnson 1999). Eventually, she would come back home to crash. After getting some rest and cleaning

herself up, she would promise to never leave and to never smoke crack again. However, she would soon go back out again and the process repeated itself.

During this family crisis, B.K. had to take time off from work to look after his daughters. As a result, he lost his job. Then his mother was diagnosed with cancer. He took her in and looked after her and his daughters during his period of unemployment. After 6 months, B.K.'s mother passed away. She had remained an alcoholic until the end.

When B.K. entered the study in 2004, his wife's daughter was 9 years old. B.K. explained that he is the only father she ever knew. He accepted her as his own child and became her legal guardian. B.K. and his wife had two daughters together, who were aged five and six in 2004. B.K. also kept in touch with his two older daughters—age seventeen and twenty—two by then—who lived with their mother in Brooklyn. He had a mutual agreement with his former partner who accepted and appreciated his continued involvement with their girls.

Custodial Father

Soon after entering the study, B.K. threw his wife out and filed for divorce. He told her that he did not want their daughters subjected to her addiction anymore, and that she could not come back into the home. He was very disappointed with his wife and admitted that he still loved her and missed her. The girls missed her too. But her behavior was disrupting the family. Soon afterwards, she entered a long-term residential treatment program. However, this was not enough to save their relationship. During her stay, their separation became permanent.

B.K. retained their two-bedroom apartment and retained custody of the three daughters, their two biological daughters and her daughter from a previous relationship. He was also rehired by the fast food chain as General Manager of one of their restaurants. For B.K., raising his daughters was now the most important thing in his life, with or without his wife, and he swore he would not let them down.

B.K. proudly described the demands of his day looking after both his children and his restaurant. He explained that he had to be at work at six o'clock in the morning. He prepared his children's clothes the night before. He would get them up with him at three thirty in the morning and take them to his cousin's house nearby. She would put them back to bed. B.K. could then go to work. He followed this schedule five days a week. Wednesday and Sunday were his days off. On Wednesdays, he and the girls looked forward to going to bible study together.

In 2005, he became intimately involved with a friend from church. He filed for a divorce from his wife; it was finalized in August 2006. He also filed for full custody of the girls in his care. His ex-wife did not contest his petition and he was granted custodial custody of all three girls. B.K. reported that he took custody of his daughters because he wanted to be a role model to them, to teach them to respect themselves and others, to teach them the importance of education, and to instill in them the value of parenting and nurturing. He described at age 50 the meaning and joy he had found in his current life despite ongoing hardships:

Right now? What am I doing? Right now, I'm just trying to survive this world, you know. Um, life is—life is bowl mm cherries, like they say [sarcastically]. [Deborah chuckles]. Ahh, I don't know, this, what am I doing sometimes. I really don't know. I really don't know. I just know that I can't stop doing it, whatever it is. I have to keep going. And, its not like I am living for myself anymore. I'm responsible for my children, my family. And that's basically what I want to do. I wanna take care of that. And my goals, mm, get to a point in life where I don't have

to work so hard. Get that point—get to a point where I can relax a little more, enjoy more of my family.

Discussion

B.K.'s tale illustrates many of the negative forces and the positive resources available in the inner-city. When we started our study, B.K. and his partner looked like typical members of the Transient Domesticity study. Both B.K. and his wife had extended histories of crack abuse, and B.K.'s wife was having a very serious relapse. Accordingly, we considered B.K.'s life prospects to be worse than many of the younger focal subjects that had never become involved with the use of hard drugs. The life course perspective reminds us that major historical events greatly impact people's lives (Alwin and McCammon 2003; Golub et al. 2005). The devastation of much of B.K.'s adult life was situated in the height of the crack epidemic in New York City.

There were several public policy interventions that helped B.K. immensely. There was the series of foster homes that took B.K. and his brothers from a troubled family and provided a stable environment for them. Overall, B.K. greatly appreciated and enjoyed his group home experiences. His challenge was being released back to his mother. This transition could have been improved through increased follow-up care. We do not know the extent that B.K. could have called young adult services, nor the extent that he would have. However, the transition from the protected and disciplined environment of a group home to independent living on the streets of New York City proved problematic and led to his eventual involvement with gangs, drug selling, and drug abuse.

Drug treatment also worked for B.K. The program led him to develop clear mainstream values (caring for his family) and the personal discipline to follow through on his life goals, even in the face of a demanding lifestyle. Not everyone who goes through drug treatment is as successful as B.K. Indeed, relapse is quite common. B.K.'s ex-wife, whom he met in treatment, was not able to remain sober and eventually ended up back in treatment. Again, aftercare is essential. B.K. made use of Narcotics Anonymous. This aftercare program ultimately did not work for his wife.

Most centrally, this paper seeks to fill out the story behind the growing number of African American custodial fathers. We were surprised, impressed and pleased with B.K.'s experiences during the course of the project. It was B.K.'s personal resolve and abilities that made it possible for him to become a responsible custodial father in 2004. He became drug free. He maintained a responsible position in the mainstream economy, with a demanding schedule. He took charge of doing right by his daughters, and even his partner's daughter from a previous relationship. His actions made a difference in his life, in the life of his family, and ultimately in the life of his community as a role model through his church. Custodial fathers like B.K. are a powerful resource that are doing right by the African American community.

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