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MIDLANDS VOICES

Work to bolster father-son bond

BY CHIP MAXWELL

The writer, of Omaha, is executive director of the Fatherhood-Family Initiative.

Freezing rain started falling a half-hour before the Fatherhood-Family Initiative's weekly Wednesday night father-son basketball session on Dec. 15. It was the front edge of a storm generating a winter weather advisory.

Would anyone show up?

When FFI was being organized, some declared that, even in good weather, no one would show up for FFI's Home Team Sports Club. They said fathers and sons don't care enough about spending time together, especially in the black community.

Besides, some asked, do we really need another program?

FFI salutes other programs serving at-risk youth. But the problems they address — poverty, crime, high dropout rates, out-of-wedlock births, psychological issues — will still be around in 10 or 20 years if we don't address the root cause of those problems: the breakdown of the two-parent family and the absence of the father in family life.

Another criticism of FFI was that its fourth grade-through-high school senior program wouldn't include girls.

Girls, too, need fathers. But if we let girls in the gym, things get more complicated. And forget about the fathers. The focus of the boys and girls would be each other, not their dads.

FFI provides an environment for fathers to help sons become good men. That's what society needs right now.

It's not girls who are stabbing and shooting and killing each other — and sometimes innocent bystanders. It's boys who are angrily and violently thrashing toward manhood without the stabilizing and loving force of a father to help them harness their male instincts in positive ways.

Some naysayers said FFI was recycling the midnight basketball cliché and perpetuating a black male stereotype. Just pass out some basketballs and that will solve life's problems — or at least keep aspiring felons busy for a few hours.

For FFI, basketball is a way to get fathers and sons together doing something relatively easy to organize. Remember, we're talking about males. You can't put them in a room and tell them to bond. The buzz of a gym — motion, shouts, bouncing balls, squeaking shoes, sweat, competition, teamwork — is perfect.

Not all the fathers play. Usually, there are one or two fathers on each team acting as player-coaches, with boys rotating in and out so all of them get to play.

One night, we had the fathers sit out. The teams were all boys. It was the one bad night we've had. The level of play and sportsmanship dropped dramatically.

Next time, we went back to our usual formula. Much better. Having the fathers directly involved made a big difference.

That lesson applies beyond the gym.

Promoting father-son interaction is why FFI was started by the Omaha Masonic Community Center Foundation. I'm not a Mason, but I've learned that the Masons have a long tradition of community service, such as founding and running the Omaha Home for Boys.

I've also learned that a black man named Prince Hall founded the first African-American masonic lodge in the revolutionary era. The Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Nebraska is part of a two-century legacy of black male community leadership in America.

FFI is open to all, but there's a reason we hold our weekly session at Jesuit Middle School in the heart of north Omaha. Family breakdown and the demise of fatherhood is a phenomenon afflicting all racial and ethnic groups, but it has hit the black community especially hard.

Prince Hall Masons don't hide from this fact. They embrace the challenge. They are passionate about male leadership and strong families and have taken a major role in FFI.

So have the fathers who participate in FFI. Some live under the same roof with their sons, some don't. Some are not biological or legal fathers but are father figures to grandsons, nephews or boys in their neighborhoods. All are answering a call to male leadership.

Despite the terrible weather Dec. 15, we had a full gym. It didn't hurt that our 2010 finale concluded with a drawing for prizes, but something more is happening. A community is forming because of a fundamental dynamic of human nature: Sons of all colors and ethnicities crave the attention and guidance of their fathers, and real men provide both.