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Giving Our Children a Chance

"It's easier to build strong children than to repair broken men" Fredrick Douglass said this in 1855. In 159 years we still haven't progressed much in our understanding of this. The focus of this conference is giving children a second chance when they re-enter society after incarceration. There is much work to be done in this area, as our children are being locked up more frequently and at alarming rates. In my city, Philadelphia, 1 in 5 students has some dealings with the criminal justice system. We are at the precipice where we can decide to value all children or decide some children are throw away. I'm going to change the direction of this conference for a little bit and talk about what we can and need to do to give children, every child a first chance.

Throughout my session you'll hear me refer to children and young adults as ours. We can continue to think of these children in terms of them; or we can think of them as ours, and begin to treat each and every one as if they were our own children and do the best for them as we would our own.

My organization, The One Less Foundation, has a mission that on the surface may not appear to have much in common with the primary theme of the Second Chance Conference; however the work we do is to make sure every child, young person and adult we come into contact with knows that they have endless opportunities in life no matter what their beginning or past may be, and that there is no singular road to success for success is defined by each person for themselves. At The One Less Foundation, our mission is to end poverty, which for most young adults and many adults who end up incarcerated, poverty is the situation they were fighting against. Poverty is often a matter of chance, circumstances and opportunity or the lack thereof. We cannot talk about the juvenile justice system and not talk about poverty, where more than 60% of US children who end up incarcerated begin or spend a substantial amount of time during their formative years. Until we address the issue of poverty which breeds, desperation, shortsighted decision making and far too often creates the perfect storm for disaster in a child's life, we will continue to watch millions of our children sent to prison, only to come out seeking a second chance that we as a society seem determined not to give them.

We need to provide a first chance for children, a first chance at having an opportunity, a first chance at getting encouragement, a first chance at having access to resources, and a first chance at failing without harsh punishment from which they have no chance to recover. Too often in our society, when someone, especially minority children and children from low-income, poverty stricken homes and communities make a mistake, we punish them with a harshness and severity that sends a message to them that says 'we've given up on you'. Are we ok with being a society that gives up on the most vulnerable among us? Are we a society that gives up on children, whom we have never given a chance for success? These are questions we must ask ourselves.

We will not help our children or provide them with the opportunities they need if we are not willing to listen to them. They need to become an active participant if not leader of their futures. As adults we need to do more asking of them 'what can I do to help you', 'what do you need from me', rather than the standard response of 'this is what you need to do' or 'listen to me'. As adults in order to help children not get on the road that may lead to incarceration, we need to listen and we need to hear them.

In my organization, we focus on providing young people with an outlet to express their interests without fear of being told their ideas and dreams are stupid, out of reach or not for them. We work to teach them how to create a plan for reaching those dreams. We work to help them realize that they can do and become what they dream about. We are able to do the work we do through the help of volunteers. About 80% of the work we do is through the help of volunteers, people like you, your neighbors, your friends and family who care and want to help a young person succeed.

At The One Less Foundation, we have a mentoring program called RISE which stands for Reaching Independence and Success through Education. When we speak of education, we don't just encourage and help students excel and achieve in school and textbook learning, we also encourage them and help them to learn about the world, arts and culture and their own interests as you never know what is going to spark a young person to their own personal greatness. In our organization we support the work of many other nonprofits who deal directly with youth and adults integrating back into society after leaving addiction, prison and homelessness, through the use of our programs. We support organizations that work with youth in foster care and other adjudicated circumstances. Our programs help them outline goals for their lives, and create a path they can follow to reach those goals, because no two people will follow the same path in life, so each one needs to create what will work and be effective for them. We help them discover how they can use their talents and interests to turn them into employment opportunities. What we do is provide hope, and the resources, and they, the adults and young adults we work with are more than willing to do the work needed to change their lives and go in the direction they want to go.

We focus a lot of our work and programs on providing young adults with mentors, people outside of their normal environment, who step in to listen to them, care about and help them learn how to make decisions that will positively affect their futures. Every child at some point in their life gets a mentor, sometimes through a selective conscious choice such as a mentoring program, and other times through unconscious selection based on close proximity. Often times for kids who end up in the prison system, it's the unconscious selection of the neighborhood drug dealer, gang member or other negative influence that takes the active role in that child's life that becomes a mentor. As adults it's up to us to decide if that mentor will be a positive or negative influence, we can all become a mentor or take some role in a child's life to be that positive influence and person who cares. We just have to do it.

One of the things that we as adults don't often times do well is encourage students to find their own passion, learn how to develop it and create an individual path to success or even to help a young person create their own definition of success, for it will not be the same for everyone. Nor should we try to box children into our own ideas of success and tell them what it looks like, thereby telling them what it should look like and be for them. There is no one right way to achieve success in life, and there is no one right path that all children will travel to become a success, we need to do better at helping each child find the path that works for them. And then we need to teach them that their own path may take detours and they may find themselves getting off that path, but ensuring them that there are ways to get back on their path – and then we as adults need to make sure if a child gets off their path, that we have put roads into place that lead back to success instead of placing roadblocks that lead only to detention, and no second chances. As adults it's our responsibility to provide a safe place for children to take some chances, and risks in life and know that they will have a safe landing spot, to regain any lost footing and begin anew.

What our children and young adult need is encouragement. They need to hear that they can become what they determine is a success, they need to be told that they will become a productive member of society, instead of assumed to be and told they will grow up to be nothing or a criminal. What we tell our children they will become. When we tell them they will grow up to be criminals and then treat them as such, that is what they will become – that shouldn't be a surprise when it happens. If we tell them they will grow up to be doctors, lawyers, creators of

technology and art, scientific problem solvers and anything that they have a passion for that is what they will become. We help determine what a child becomes by what we say to them and by what we teach them. As adults who interact with them, we can do better – we must do better. Their lives depend on it.

Access to resources, this is a must. This is where we can do and be the biggest help to children and young adults, in an effort to help them from getting entangled in the justice and prison system. We must provide them with access to resources that lead to opportunity. If children do not think they have options in life for growth, getting an education, which we all know is important, they will give up and give in to pressures to obtain what they want by any means they deem necessary.

By providing access to resources, no longer are our children left to wait for things to happen to them, they can now take control and make life happen for them.

If we are going to be a society that preaches education as the primary path to success and the primary creator of options, then we must find ways to keep children engaged in the learning process, involve them in some of the planning, implementation and delivery of their education and we must not throw them out of the very institutions that we tell them they need to be in. Schools need to get rid of zero tolerance policies. We should not be in the business of throwing a child out of an institution for learning AND tell them at the same time this is the only place where they can get what they need to succeed. What sense that does make? It doesn't make sense and it only leads to chaos, confusion and a desire to rebel.

Aside from ending zero tolerance policies, we need to provide more to the education system that challenges children to think critically about themselves and the world around them. Why more critical thinking? Because it leads to them learning that they are in control of their lives and that they don't have to bow to the whims of everyone else around them, which is especially important, if they are coming a difficult or challenging environment, on which the deck appears stacked against them from the onset.

Other resources we need to make sure our children have access to include learning how to deal with the sometimes harsh environments they are born into and raised in, we must provide access to education that we tell them is the necessary foundation, we must provide access to outlets for them to express themselves, we must provide access to the resources that will keep them healthy, productive and focused on their futures.

What can you do to help? Aside from what your government is doing or not doing, there are things that as individuals and collectively as a group you can do to enact change. It doesn't take millions of dollars for each of you to take one child under your guidance; collectively you can organize and create groups that run social programs that provide opportunity, you can find out what resources are available to you, and you can make a difference and change the life of at least one child. If you are able to help one child stay out of the prison system, you will have succeeded

We must believe and we must know that each and every child matters. The future of each and every child matters, not only to them but to each of us as well. What happens to children in high poverty areas, and those more likely to get ensnared in the prison system, matters because it affects us. We can choose to provide our children with opportunity, access to resources and to inspire them to become the best they can become or we can continue to incarcerate and throw them away. The choice is up to us. Our actions will tell the choice we are making. We can choose to step up and step into the life of a child when they need it, or we can choose to lock them up and deny them the ability to rise above their situations. We can choose to save our children or we can choose to lose them.

We are failing our children, and selling them to the highest bidder – the prison system, when we don't provide opportunity, encouragement and resources. When they leave the prison system, they need assistance to completely leave the system, not just physically, but mentally, emotionally and intellectually. For those children already ensnared in the system, as others who will come after me today will say, we need to change what we are doing to provide that second chance, third chance and so on because all children are deserving of what we all seek – kindness, forgiveness, compassion and help to become the best people we can become. None of these children, not one of them are unredeemable or unworthy of a chance to succeed. Not one of them should be thrown away and forgotten. I ask all of you in attendance today to join in the work, either on the front end preventing children from getting caught up in the system or working on the back end to ensure they have options – an opportunity, encouragement and access to resources to get their lives back on track.

Thank you and it's been my pleasure to speak before you today.

