

Foreword

When Ralph Nesson first approached me about becoming the founding Board President of the Arkansas Single Parent Scholarship Program, I had to think hard about the wisdom of taking on any additional responsibilities. At the time, in 1989, I was First Lady of Arkansas, had a busy private law practice, was rearing a young child, and already had extensive community commitments. However, the more I thought about the daily desperation facing so many young parents, the more convinced I became of the enormous potential this program had for dealing with that desperation in a practical, productive, and lasting way. And my dear friend, Professor Diane Blair, convinced me we had to try to expand the program's reach and success.

Eleven years later, now that over six thousand scholarships have been awarded through this program to single parents whose lives have been transformed permanently for the better, I am very grateful I was given an opportunity to help bring this program to life. I hope this book will inform and inspire many others, who will then replicate the program in their own states and communities.

The goal of the Single Parent Scholarship Fund is to assist poor single parents to complete the higher education which is indispensable for skilled employment and family economic security in today's world. Even the most ambitious and determined of single parents often finds herself or himself struggling against an array of discouraging factors:

the high cost of tuition and books; the scarcity and expense of good day care; the absence of extended family or friends to provide backup day care and emotional support; the lack of reliable transportation; the lack of information about available scholarships and other assistance. No wonder so many become discouraged, and the downhill spiral begins.

The Single Parent Scholarship Program begins by directing recipients toward every form of tuition and scholarship assistance available for post-secondary education. It provides guidance toward all public and private assistance, everything from housing to health care, for which recipients and their children may be eligible. Recipients are offered mentoring by knowledgeable and responsible adults in their communities. And then the scholarship itself is awarded, usually \$500 per semester for those who are making good progress toward graduation. That amount may seem negligible to some, but in fact it often provides the indispensable margin between success and failure.

The uses of that money are as varied as the lives of the individuals involved—everything from child care to car repairs, school shoes to utility bills. One woman memorably recounted for me how she had been unable, prior to the Single Parent Scholarship, to take certain courses necessary for her degree because of the laboratory fees involved and the cost of a lab coat, essential expenses simply not covered by her tuition assistance. Another woman was able to purchase automobile insurance, another bought two new tires for her car, without which these women were literally immobilized. It is the flexibility in the use of the money that makes it so valuable to scholarship recipients, not only for its monetary worth but for its symbolic meaning. Many scholarship recipients tell us that simply knowing that

others had enough confidence in them to invest in their lives and trust their judgment was a powerful and uplifting agent for change.

Scholarship recipients have told me that often the biggest beneficiaries of the scholarship are their children, who, watching their moms taking their schooling so seriously, become much better students themselves. One woman related that she was on the verge of dropping out of college, worried that the sacrifices she was asking of her children were just too weighty; but her son's schoolteacher told her, "Don't you dare drop out. Not a day goes by that your son doesn't brag to his classmates that his Mom's going to be an engineer."

The stories of degrees earned, good jobs obtained, children's lives immeasurably improved are an endless source of gratification to the volunteers and contributors who have brought this program to maturity all across Arkansas. However, the evidence of this program's success is much more than anecdotal. At this writing, forty-eight counties are represented by Arkansas Single Parent Scholarship Fund affiliates; and an extensive follow-up survey conducted in 1997 indicated that 69 percent of graduates were employed at higher than poverty-level wages.

And what better evidence of this program's effectiveness could there be than the fact that the author of this volume, Lori Holyfield, herself one of the program's first scholarship recipients, used the funds to earn a degree from the University of Arkansas, went on to secure a Ph.D., and is now a member of the University of Arkansas faculty. I know Lori shares my hopes that the information provided in her book will be used by many others, to establish Single Parent Scholarship Funds in their own communities.

There is no reason that this wonderful idea can't work in places beyond Arkansas. Local businesses, foundations, churches, civic organizations, and private citizens can join together to form their own scholarship funds and their own committees, designed to help single parents in their communities lift themselves and their families out of poverty on a permanent basis. The investment is minimal. But the rewards for the recipient, their communities, and all those who become involved, are rich indeed.

Hillary Rodham Clinton

Preface

While teaching introductory sociology to students from a variety of backgrounds, I have become convinced that popular opinion greatly inflates the power of the individual. This celebration of the American notion of “rags to riches” comes to us at a high cost. As we focus on the ideal of individualism, we often forget that community is essential to these efforts. Community-sponsored programs that foster education, health, and well-being are now necessary to compensate for widespread cuts in federal programs such as welfare. Moreover, we often gasp at the mere suggestion that community might be *obligated* to aid in this process as more and more of America’s children slip through the safety net and into poverty.

Perhaps it seems odd that one would write a book about the beneficiaries of a program that provides just a few hundred dollars in scholarship support. After all, the soaring costs of education will require a much larger financial base than what the Arkansas Single Parent Scholarship Fund (ASPSF) can offer. Indeed, when I first began this project some of my colleagues were skeptical. They asked, “How can a few hundred dollars make such a big difference?” My response was typically, “Because this particular scholarship is rich in symbolism.” For most poor single mothers, just the opportunity to obtain a post-secondary education is an empowering first step in their journey toward independence. “Imagine being someone for whom opportunities

have been blocked all your life,” I would tell them, “and an organization from your *own* community—*not* the federal government, *not* the state, *not* some nameless corporation—but people from your own community have stepped up to say, ‘We believe in you.’” I would add, “Remember it’s a scholarship, not a hand-out.” For many scholarship recipients, myself included, it was as if members of our community had managed to clear for us a small path to self-sufficiency. We had to walk those paths on our own, no doubt, but we did it with their financial and moral support.

My intention in writing this book is twofold. First, I want to shed light on the real lives of single parent families. Second, I hope to encourage readers to consider establishing a Single Parent Scholarship Fund in their own community.

It is also my hope that this book will not become one of those dusty relics that we place high on our bookshelves and only take down occasionally to remind ourselves of the numbing statistics surrounding poverty in the United States. The stories I am about to share with you belong to single mothers throughout Arkansas. They echo the stories of single parents across this country: single moms who struggle, hope, and dream of self-sufficiency.

Of the approximately 14 million single parent households in the United States, about two million are currently single father headed families. I interviewed three single fathers in the early stages of research and found that their struggles were in some ways similar to those of women. However, while the Scholarship is made available to both single moms and dads, over 99 percent of the beneficiaries are women. Because of the small number of fathers avail-

able for the study and the unique problems single mothers face, for the purpose of this book I chose to focus specifically upon the women, their families, and their struggles.

The women you will meet in this book are just a few of the millions of single parents who understand that raising children in the face of poverty is a huge task, no matter the individual circumstances. The difference, however, is that for many of the women in this book, the likelihood of experiencing a life free of welfare dependency has been greatly enhanced by a little-known program titled the Arkansas Single Parent Scholarship Fund.

The research that led to the writing of this book began in the spring of 1999. My meetings with the women who participated in this project were not by chance; I knew before I met them that their stories were also my own. As both a sociologist interested in poverty and an early beneficiary of the Scholarship, I wanted to know if obtaining an education was as much a life-changing event for others as it was for me.

In May of 1999 I received a small grant to study the histories of women who had participated in the Scholarship Fund and to examine what barriers they faced in obtaining their education. The funding allowed me to hire two graduate students for summer research and to travel throughout Arkansas and conduct in-depth interviews with former Scholarship recipients.

Various county affiliates of the Scholarship Fund provided the names of both current and former recipients. The research took place in two phases: phase one included interviews with those who had graduated from a postsecondary institution and were now employed, and phase two included those who dropped out of school and were no

longer receiving the scholarship. The second phase was completed in the fall of 2000.

With the aid of graduate students, fifty-three individuals were interviewed for the project. Each was given a pseudonym. Some interviews were conducted in the homes of former recipients, some in restaurants, and some took place in work settings. Without exception, each woman was willing to share her experiences, both good and bad. Forty-one single mothers were asked to describe their journeys and to identify the most important barriers faced by single parents today. Many of their stories will be presented throughout the book. We asked them about being poor and of the struggles they faced. We asked about their dreams for the future and how obtaining an education has changed those dreams over time. We asked about their expectations for their children and what they believe the future now holds.

Many of the women are now finished with their educations and are gainfully employed at wages well above poverty level. What do they identify as the most important ingredients for success? Were the benefits worth the struggle? Do they look back on their experiences in similar or different ways, and what advice would they give to other single parents?

Even though the graduation rate is remarkable for those who receive the scholarships (an average of 70 percent throughout fifty-five participating counties), a significant number of single parents do drop out of school. I spoke to twelve of them to better understand the barriers they encountered. I wanted to hear their stories and learn whether their situations were similar to or different from those who graduated. What were some of the conditions they faced

while attending school and how did those affect their choices? Were there ways that nonprofit organizations such as ASPSF could help prevent the conditions that led to dropping out?

The first five chapters comprise an attempt to weave together the statistical data with the actual lived experiences of single mothers and their children. The Introduction explains something of my own family's journey out of poverty and the role of the Arkansas Single Parent Scholarship Fund in that journey. Chapter 1 begins with just a few of the "before" and "after" narratives of women who have benefited from obtaining their education. Chapter 1 also addresses the issue of poverty, providing a broader context for the issue of welfare and its relationship to the single parent family.

In these five chapters, the voices of the women who participated in this project are interwoven to demonstrate how policies and moral rhetoric impact their lives and the lives of their children. Chapters 1 and 2 both document the barriers single parents face. Chapter 2 outlines welfare reform and policy. It discusses the implications for single parent families attempting to gain their education under current law. Chapter 3 examines the myths and images single mothers confront and the social stigma they have experienced in their sometimes long journey out of poverty.

Chapter 4 addresses education and mobility. In this chapter, I draw upon sociological analysis of our "credentialized" society and review the impact education has upon social mobility as well as its limitations. Also included is a discussion of the implications education has for the children of single parent families. Chapter 5 draws upon the voices of single mothers again, who explain the obstacles

that led them to drop out or the benefits education has brought them.

Combined, Chapters 6 and 7 provide a framework that may be used by readers from other states as they attempt to influence policy and establish similar programs. Chapter 6 documents the philosophy and organizational structure behind the Arkansas Single Parent Scholarship Fund, and highlights the power of giving and the importance it holds for donors and volunteers as well. It is intended to provide readers with suggestions for implementing a grassroots scholarship fund and strategies for building an advisory board, raising donations, and building an endowment. Chapter 7 discusses policy suggestions that could help reduce poverty among single parent families and facilitate their greater participation in post-secondary education. It returns to the specific reasons single parent scholarships are so needed, not just in Arkansas but throughout the country. Appendix A provides the constitution and bylaws of the Arkansas Single Parent Scholarship Fund, and Appendix B contains a list of nonprofit resources for those readers interested in establishing a scholarship or similar program.

Introduction

Megan was five when she and I moved to our small rent-supported house on Pettigrew Street. Her father and I had divorced when she was two, and contact between them was infrequent until she reached the age of twelve and he reached sobriety. Technically it would be incorrect to say we lived on the “other side” of the tracks, but we were one block from them—close enough by most standards. Our house was on the corner of a dead-end street that served as the entrance to a local factory. It was not exactly a quiet neighborhood. The workers arrived a little before 6:00 A.M. and apparently dislodged their mufflers just before turning onto our street, as if to say, “We’re here, we’re loud, get used to it!” We never did.

It was a small frame house with two tiny bedrooms. The house had a stench to it when we moved in, a mixture of Pine-Sol and roach spray, that we were never able to get rid of. Its windows were perpetually fogged from the gases released between the double panes. It felt like Christmas year-round until a friend explained that it meant the insulation was no longer working. Megan and I made cut-out snowflakes and pasted them to the windows anyway.

The house did have its amusing features. A furnace, the type that stretches from the floor to the ceiling, was located in the living room on the wall between our bedrooms. Both Megan and I were sure it was haunted. When the thermostat kicked in, flames would burst out several inches

from the bottom. Sometimes we tip-toed past it just to see if we might outsmart the fiery demon. It was, after all, our first home since the divorce that did not have wood heat and did not require stoking in the middle of the night. Although we did not own a lawn mower, we at least had a small patch of lawn, which was a far cry better than the alternative, a housing authority apartment.

Megan's birthday fell in October, making her too young to enroll in first grade that year. But she was too old to attend another year of Head Start, so I enrolled her in a private nursery school a few blocks away from our home and paid almost one-third of my paycheck to keep her there. There may have been assistance for child care, but I was a full-time worker and did not receive AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children). If I was eligible for assistance, I never knew it. Besides, I felt humiliated enough every time I paid the rent, or bought groceries with the small allotment of food stamps we received. I dreaded the disapproving glances at the check-out counter, and imagined people watching to see if I really drove a Cadillac. I paid the child care expenses myself, and we held on as best we could.

I tried several things to keep Megan and myself afloat after the divorce. I waited tables, stocked produce, worked the graveyard shift in a factory, played in an R&B band, and washed windows on weekends. Still, by 1982 I had run out of options and decided to try construction work. This was, after all, "man's" work and was sure to pay better than what I had been earning. And with only a ninth-grade education, I knew this was probably the best I could do. I worked on bridges, tied steel, and finished concrete, but remained a "laborer" (a nicer term for the lowest-paid worker).

I wanted more for Megan and myself but couldn't get there, not without an education. And no matter how hard I was willing to work, Megan and I barely remained afloat. We never had a telephone; that would have been a luxury. I paid the bills in a sporadic fashion, the light bill one month, the gas and water the next. I remember watching an episode of the sit-com *Roseanne* a few years ago. Roseanne was explaining to her husband how she had learned to keep the utilities on by sending the gas company the check for the light bill, and the light company the water bill, and so on. I remember joking, "I thought I was the only one who did that!" But there was little humor to our real-life situation. For Megan and I, poverty and everything that came with it seemed to clench its fist and pound us with no mercy. Sometimes we skimmed the surface; sometimes we bobbed up and down. All too often we came up gasping for air just before we were sucked under again. It was as if all the exits out of poverty were blocked—and indeed they were, but not for the reasons I thought.

Opportunities *were* being blocked, but I had never studied sociology and did not know that there is a direct correlation between education and poverty. I did not realize that as many as 24 percent of those without at least a high school diploma live in poverty. I was not aware that with a college education, the chances of living in poverty dropped dramatically, to just 2 percent. I just knew that I was unlucky! I did not realize that, without an education, this was truly as good as it would ever be. All I knew was that I was divorced, willing to work and struggle for my family, and it simply was not enough. It was the little things that kept us down: a toothache, the flu, the measles, a day missed from work, a car that failed to start. Preventive health care and

wellness programs were not in my vocabulary. As with 44 million other Americans, health insurance for us was only a dream.

High school diplomas were certainly valued in my family, but neither of my parents finished high school. My older sister and brother had, however, and they both encouraged me to take the GED (high school equivalency) examination in the winter of 1983. I followed their advice and passed the exam. Then, after months of heavy prodding on their part, I enrolled at the University of Arkansas, terrified of what lay ahead.

College was another world indeed, and my romantic image of it left me ill prepared for what I would encounter. Studying did not come easy for me. In fact, much of my first year can best be described as an “adjustment period.” Megan was doing well in the first grade and I was trying to convince myself that I really could be a student. As for so many single parent students, study time was relegated to a few hours in the library between classes and late in the evening after Megan was asleep. Although my confidence was starting to build, I lived in constant fear that my professors would find me out and realize I was a fraud who lacked all the necessary capital for this investment. Sooner or later someone would show me the door.

I was entering my second semester when I met Ralph Nesson, the director of the Single Parent Scholarship Fund. He was working in a dilapidated building that housed the Economic Opportunity Agency (EOA) of Washington County, where I had come more than once to seek help with utility bills. I don’t remember how I found out about the Scholarship Fund, but I remember my meeting with Ralph very well. Earlier encounters with service agencies, especially the Department of Human Services, child-

support enforcement, and the housing authority, had made me more than a little skeptical about the interview. I fully expected the all-too-familiar humiliation of having to prove my eligibility for the “entitlement” about to be bestowed upon me. But I resolved to go through the process if it would help me stay in school another semester.

The meeting did not happen as I had expected. Ralph greeted me with a warm smile, invited me into his office, and we sat down to discuss the scholarship application. Ralph asked me about my daughter and how I was doing. He asked me about college and my experiences there. I answered politely, sure the bottom would drop out at any moment. I had come to distrust such situations; they always seemed more like an interrogation than a conversation, and I always left feeling worse about myself than when I came in. But this was different. Ralph told me how proud he was that I took the chance of returning to school and said that he knew it was a risk. He said he understood it was difficult to get by financially, even on the student loans and Pell grant, and he asked if I knew about the Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant and other forms of aid that might help. Apologetically, Ralph explained that while the fund did not have a lot of money to give, he could offer a \$300 scholarship and that maybe I could use it to help with child care, or gas, or to fix my car, just whatever I felt was needed. I thought to myself, What, no need for deference? No ritual of humiliation? I didn’t have to promise to spend the funds for this or that purpose? No receipts to prove how I spent the money? Not this time. He trusted me to know best.

I received the scholarship throughout the remainder of my undergraduate studies, using the money for everything from child care and transportation to books and materials.

I remember that I looked forward to the interviews with the scholarship board each semester because it offered me an opportunity to share with them the positive changes in my life. I gained more confidence with each successful semester. Looking back today, I believe those encounters with members of my own community made the difference.

My story could have been the story of thousands of women who have struggled to edge their way out of poverty. The fact that my story ends happily, however, is in large part due to the generosity of the Scholarship Fund and the various other forms of financial aid I received. But the empowerment I experienced in that initial meeting with Ralph Nesson was also remarkable. It must be difficult to understand the symbolic importance of an experience such as this unless one's self-esteem has truly hit bottom. I remember thinking, "A scholarship for me? Does he really think I can do this?" As it turns out, he did. Indeed, so did the board members, the many volunteers, and the donors to the Scholarship Fund. Fourteen years later, in a meeting with state legislators, I listened as Ralph described the program, which now assists single parents statewide and has an endowment of over \$1 million, as a "barn raising" experience, one that allows the community to give to others. He was right.

The Single Parent Scholarship Fund began as a small grassroots effort in 1984. The mission was a simple one, as Ralph recalls: "We wanted to help single mothers get the education that would provide them with rewarding jobs, so they wouldn't need our help anymore and instead be able to give back to the community in productive ways."

The fund was the brainchild of a small group of people in northwest Arkansas. Ralph, then director of EOA, and Marjorie Marugg-Wolfe, the director of adult education and the displaced-homemakers program at a local technical school, had often discussed the unmet needs of their low-income clients and the barriers many of them faced to completing their education. Ralph recalls that during one of their many conversations on this topic, Marjorie interjected, "If you really want to do something to help lower-income people go to school, think about the women with children." Ralph agreed: Women with children were in many ways the ones who most needed opportunities to continue their educations but also had the fewest resources to do so.

Women would often come into the vocational-technical school where Marjorie worked and look up courses they might take, then walk right back out the door when they saw the costs. Among all the barriers they faced, the financial costs ranked high. Consequently, Ralph and Marjorie wanted to find a way to provide financial incentives to single parents without all the red tape and bureaucratic entanglements of other programs. A scholarship would do both! And so the Single Parent Scholarship Fund was born. Neither Ralph nor Marjorie could have predicted that sixteen years later the fund would operate statewide and would have provided over six thousand Arkansans with scholarship assistance. I will return to the Arkansas Single Parent Scholarship Fund in Chapter 6 to say more about its philosophy and successes.