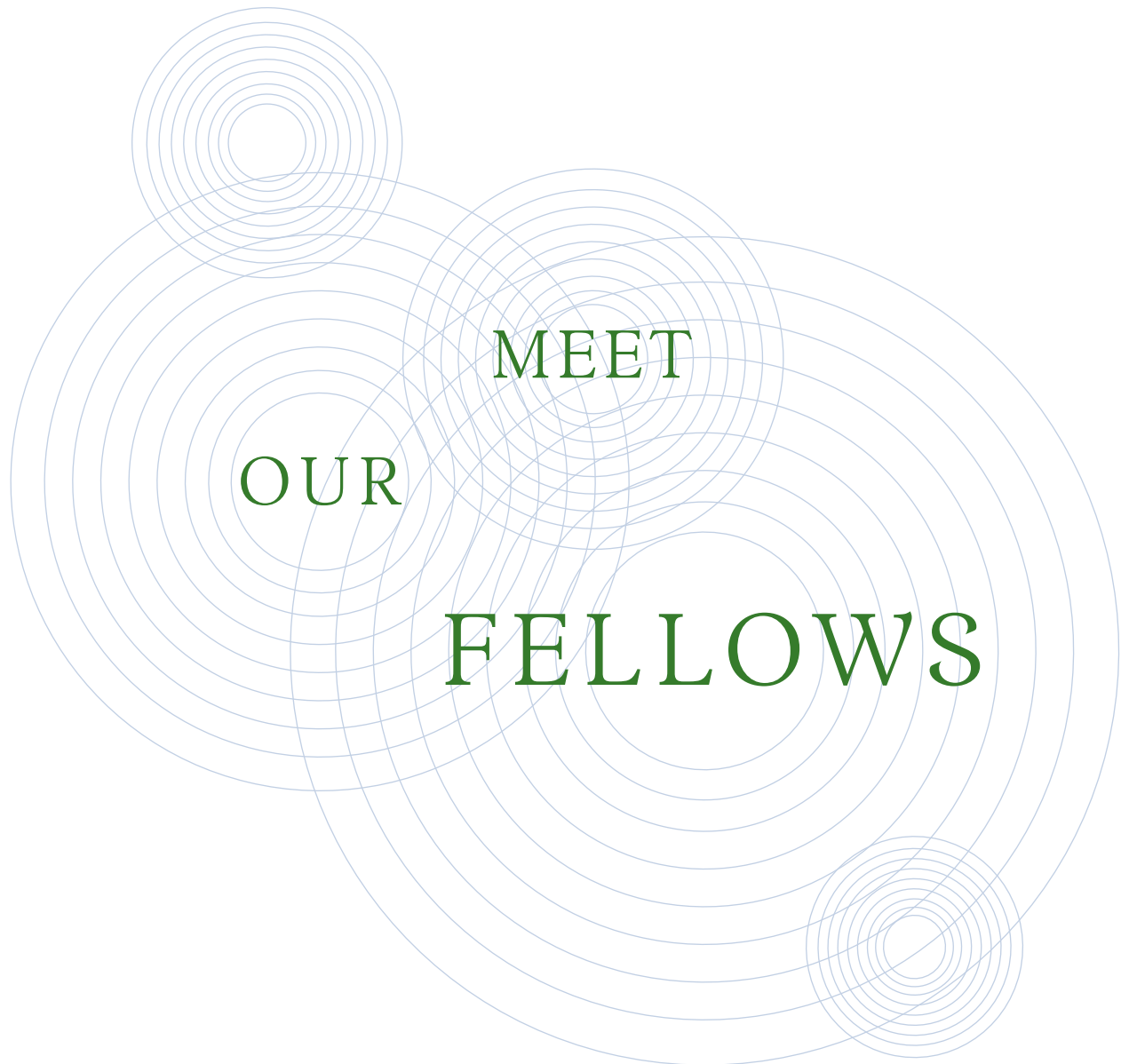




THE STONELEIGH FELLOWS PROGRAM




RUFUS SYLVESTER LYNCH



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Fellowship Project: The Integration of Responsible Fatherhood within Foster Care System Delivery and Other Systems of Care

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God bless the child that's got his own. When most people hear that line, they think of Billie Holiday who wrote and sang that well-known song. When Rufus Sylvester Lynch hears it, he thinks of his foster mother, the woman who raised him on the east side of Baltimore from age four through 17. "She used to say that to me all the time," he says. "It may sound like a harsh thing to say to a foster child who has nothing, but she was telling me the truth. I credit my foster mother for that." In fact, there have been times in his life when Lynch has used his foster mother's words as a mantra. "I have always wanted to make my own way, to have my own," he says. "I've drilled the same thing into my daughter's and son's ears."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge and thank Bernardine H. Watson, the author of this article, who tells an inspiring story about Rufus Sylvester Lynch. Ms. Watson interviewed Mr. Lynch and wrote this profile based on their conversations. This is the tenth in our series of "Meet the Fellows" profiles. The series is intended to provide readers with stories that describe our fellows' motivation, goals and the philosophies that drive their work.

Ms. Watson is a social policy consultant living in Washington, D.C. She writes for and provides strategic advice to foundations, think tanks and nonprofits.

Lynch was so young when he, his brother, and sister were placed in foster care, that he hardly remembers the early details. "To the best of my recollection, I was under four years of age," he says. "My sister and brother were both younger than me. I think we were in three different placements before we got to the home where we were raised. To this day I don't know why my parents gave us up."

While telling the story of his early childhood, Lynch seems almost matter of fact. In spite of his manner, it would be a mistake to assume that he is unfeeling about his upbringing. In fact, his feelings run deep. In recalling his foster mother, whom he calls Mom, Lynch says, "while she was a very reserved and deliberate woman, I sense that she cared about me; not because she ever said it, not because she ever hugged or kissed me. She cared through the routine she created. She provided structure in my life, cleanliness, and good moral values. I think I got my ethical values from her. She lived to see me get my doctorate in social work and she was proud of me. She is responsible for who I am today. I loved her and was very protective of her. If she was still alive I would be taking care of her." Lynch's foster father simply didn't seem interested in him. "We never had a conversation, *never*," Lynch says.

In his Stoneleigh Fellowship project, "The Integration of Responsible Fatherhood within Foster Care System Delivery," Lynch sees reflections of his own childhood. "Growing up, I was always aware of the fact that I didn't have my own family," he says. "I never felt equal to other kids who did." Working with child and family agencies, fatherhood programs and other organizations at the local, state, and national levels, Lynch will attempt to increase the number of children in agency care who know their fathers. Specifically, he will develop and assess the usefulness of a model designed to integrate responsible fatherhood programming into child welfare agency policies, practices and procedures. His ultimate goal is to build the capacity of these agencies to involve more fathers in the lives of their children and, as a result, improve the well-being of children in care.



This project shows Lynch's deep concern for children, who are taken from their families like he was, and placed in homes away from their birth parents. "The main purpose of system care," Lynch says, "should be to enhance the lives of the children involved. This means working on healthy family reunification and finding a permanent home for every child. The problem is that most agencies, not just in Philadelphia, but nationally, do not consider fathers a resource in that process. For example, with family reunification, most children go home to their mothers. With kinship care, general agency practice is to place children with female relatives, like a female grandparent, aunt, or cousin. That means 50 percent of the equation is overlooked, and that is not in the best interest of the children."

In spite of his experiences with his own "father," Lynch was fortunate enough to know a man who was a caring adult figure in his life. His name was Robert Williams, a counselor at the middle school Lynch attended. "One day when I was in the 9th grade," says Lynch, "Mr. Williams called me and maybe a half dozen other Black boys down to his office and chewed us out. He said our grades did not reflect the work we could do based on our standardized test scores and that he expected much more from us. I will never forget him. The words he said to me that day marked a turning point in my life. I left the counselor's office wanting to please him simply because he cared about me. I do not know if he ever understood the impact he had on my young life, but from that day, I was determined to make something of myself."

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Lynch left his foster home in 1968 and headed for Morgan State University. He earned a B.A. in sociology and pursued his social work studies straight through to 1973 when he was awarded a Doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work. Lynch takes great pride in his accomplishments and in his profession. "Social work is about social change," he says. "We are the only profession that has an ethical responsibility to address injustice." Lynch has held many high level positions over the years. "I've been a college dean and a professor; I was senior vice president at the Philadelphia Workforce Development Corporation; the state director of court management for the Pennsylvania Supreme Court Administrative Office; the chief of staff for the Pennsylvania Speaker of the House of Representatives; senior policy advisor to the Lieutenant Governor of Pennsylvania and a special assistant to the President of the Philadelphia City Council. I've worked in the private sector and started a non-profit organization. I even ran for the Pennsylvania State Senate. Through all of these positions, I was still a social worker, doing my best to stand for systems change, social justice, fairness, and opportunity for everybody." In 2010, Lynch was recognized as a Social Work Pioneer by the National Association of Social Workers. The Pioneers program recognizes individuals "whose dedication, commitment, and determination have improved social and human conditions... and who have contributed to the evolution and enrichment of the social work profession."

When Lynch talks about children without fathers, there is no doubt about his emotions—he gets frustrated, even angry. The research on absent fathers validates his feelings. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 24 million children in America—one out of three—live in biological father-absent homes. The National Fatherhood Initiative considers this "father absent factor" a key element in the number of children who end up in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Further, a 2006 study published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services concludes that involving birth fathers in the lives of foster children could have potential benefits for both the fathers and children as long as the relationship does not pose a risk to the child. The study affirms that fathers can be important resources when making placement decisions and gaining access to benefits for children. Lynch is practical on this issue. "Involvement is not always going to mean a father



physically being in the life of a child," he says. "It can also mean resources that are available to a child as a result of the father's life. It can mean veterans' benefits, life insurance policies, or medical information. It can simply be paternal relatives that take an interest in the fact that the child is alive. These things are important; they help define who you are and help you come to terms with your life."

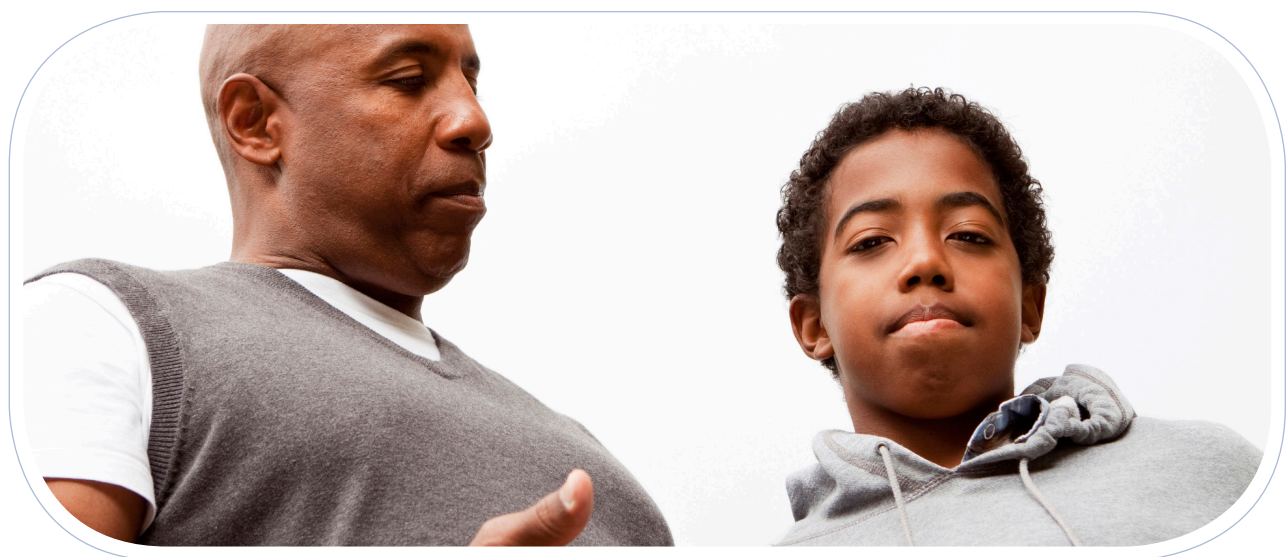
Lynch believes that his fellowship project has the potential to make life better for many children and fathers. The project has several components. First, Lynch will select a group of Philadelphia child and family service agencies with which to work. These agencies will be assessed for the "father friendliness" of their current policies, procedures, and protocols. The results of this assessment will be used to help the agencies retool and improve the quality and quantity of their interactions with fathers. Part of this process will include facilitating cooperation between the agencies and local fatherhood programs. These programs have experience with outreach to fathers and may have contact and other information that can be helpful to the agencies. Lynch plans a continuous assessment and documentation of agencies' experiences with changing their policies and procedures to include fathers so that new practices can be reviewed and refined. The ultimate product will be a model and accompanying tool-kit for integrating responsible fatherhood programming into foster care and other child and family agencies and systems. Given positive local results, Lynch plans to look for resources to further test the model state-wide and nationally, thereby adding to the knowledge base for how to effectively increase father involvement.

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There are few initiatives nationally that are attempting to fully integrate fathers into child and family serving agencies. Still, efforts to increase father involvement in the lives of their children are hardly new. Since the 1960's, absent fathers have periodically been the target of initiatives by government agencies, foundations and non-profits. Research indicates that past fatherhood initiatives have often been limited in scope and resources; or when evaluated, found to have had little impact. One problem, Lynch says, is that fatherhood efforts have, for the most part, been funded as separate initiatives and not integrated into ongoing public funding streams. "This means that when the foundation or government money is gone, project staff is cut or the whole project goes." This is one of the key reasons he is pushing for fatherhood programming to become an integral part of child and youth agency services. Lynch understands that the history of this programming makes some people skeptical about his project. "I was talking with the director of a major non-profit in the city about being a test site for the project," he says. "He asked me point blank, *what difference will this make; how will this be any different from years ago?*" Lynch's answer is simple. Times have changed."

Lynch is certain that the country's current emphasis on individual responsibility and more efficient use of government resources has created a policy environment conducive to his project. For example, President Obama's Responsible Fatherhood Initiative includes a working group of 11 federal agencies charged with finding ways to work together to eliminate duplication and improve fathers' involvement in their children's lives. On the local level, the Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS) is looking for new ways to increase father involvement and the Commissioner has endorsed Lynch's project. In her letter of support for his fellowship, Commissioner Anne Marie Ambrose admits, "our system struggles from time to time with how best to increase safe father involvement for our clients and for our staff" and that "more should and probably could be done with help." She has also encouraged foster care agencies to participate in Lynch's initiative.

Lynch has no doubt that he is uniquely qualified to implement this work. Given his personal and professional background, it is hard to quarrel with him. On a personal level he is a "survivor" of the foster care system and knows what it is like to grow up without a father. He also understands the positive affect a father figure can have on a child. "I have lived this," he says without hesitation. Professionally, Lynch points to the background and experience he has accumulated over the years. His public sector experience appears particularly apt for this complex, systems-change project. "I know government," he says. "I have functioned at the top." Further, Lynch has direct content knowledge of fatherhood policy and programming. Through the Institute for the Advancement



of Working Families, the non-profit he created in 2001, Lynch directed the first fatherhood program in Philadelphia funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare. The project provided social, economic, and legal support to low-income, non-custodial fathers who were committed to reconnecting with their children.

However, of all of the resources, personal and professional, that Lynch brings to this project, his astonishing rolodex might be the most critical. Because of the range of work experiences he has had over the years, and his reputation for getting things done, Lynch has amassed an array of high-level contacts that he is now calling on to help implement this ambitious effort. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Service Administration for Children and Families Region III Office, which includes Pennsylvania, has pledged to provide any needed data and technical assistance and to appoint a representative to sit on the project oversight committee. Several national non-profits, including the National Fatherhood Initiative have championed the importance of Lynch's work and expressed interest and support. The Pennsylvania chapter of the National Association of Social Workers will co-sponsor fatherhood training workshops for participating agency staff, conduct state and nation-wide outreach to child and family agencies on behalf of this effort and assist in the development and delivery of project materials and other information. Bryn Mawr College Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research, has endorsed the project, assisted in its design, and appointed Lynch as a research fellow for the life of his fellowship. The Dean of the School will serve as a personal advisor to Lynch throughout the project.

In Philadelphia, where interagency cooperation will be critical to the project's success, Lynch has obtained the support of the departments and agencies he needs to move forward. He has assembled a task force of over 30 diverse stakeholders who work with dependent and delinquent youth, including several responsible fatherhood programs, to oversee the initiative and assist in developing training materials and the final project model. To date 16 foster care service agencies and five juvenile justice community provider agencies have agreed to serve as pilot sites for the project and are currently participating in the initial assessment process. "Everyone is at the table," says Lynch. He is particularly encouraged by the participation of local fatherhood programs. "I think their presence at the table is a win for everyone," he says. "These programs come with a deep knowledge of the father population that can be very helpful to child and family agencies. At the same time, this is an opportunity for these often fragile programs to build relationships with agencies that can help them with future sustainability."

For Lynch, the growth and impact of the "father absent factor" is a national crime. But he says it should not surprise any of us. "How did we get here?" he asks rhetorically. "We got here through decades of social welfare policy. We created policy around children and female caretakers that excluded fathers. The public turned a blind eye so we are all culpable. The good news is that the country is beginning to realize that we are in this mess together and we must move forward. We see the consequences of father-absence in child poverty, youth incarceration and drug use and teen pregnancy rates. Things have to change. As a social worker, I intend to be in the forefront of the change."

Stoneleigh Foundation is a Philadelphia-based foundation established to help improve the well-being of children and youth. Focused on work that promotes change in our country's youth-serving systems, we meet our mission through fellowship awards that support outstanding individuals whose work unites research, policy and practice.

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