



'WE'RE NOT IN THIS ALONE': HOW AN ARIZONA PROGRAM GIVES SUPPORT, MENTORSHIP TO DADS - CRONKITE NEWS

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Photo: The Phoenix Families First Resource Center in the Burton Barr Central Library is one of the regular meeting places for Dad Together. During meetings, dads are encouraged to bring their children and interact with them alongside other parents. Photo taken in Phoenix on April 8, 2024. (Photo by Emily Mai/Cronkite News)

When Lord Washington became a father, he looked everywhere for other dads to connect with. Nothing he found gave him what he needed.

"There wasn't much out there at all," he said. "You can get links, but there was nothing that was meeting face-to-face, and there was nothing that was local to me at that point in time."

But then he found Dad Together, a program where dads of all backgrounds and stages meet up, share their experiences and support each other through their parenting journeys. It offers one-on-one mentoring, discussions and a 13-week course, called Nurturing Fathers, that teaches dads the fundamentals of parenting and nurturing.

"I actually implement a lot of the skills that I learned," Washington said of the course. "It's an everyday walk. It's a process that I actually enjoy. It's built into my consistency and discipline and who I am as a father."

Edward Casillas, program and services development manager at the Family Involvement Center, saw the need for a father-centered program about 13 years ago when his kids were involved in the child welfare system. He said it took roughly 10 years to get the Dad Together program started, mostly because of how hard it was to get funding.

Casillas said with the help of the Arizona Department of Child Safety's Office of Prevention, the program officially began in 2021 with the goal of helping dads realize they aren't alone.

"We tend to isolate. We tend to feel we must live up to this standard that society has created where we've got to be strong, and we can't talk about our feelings. We can't talk about our struggles," he said. "So this is really a place where dads can come together, and we can

support each other in being the best dads that we can for our children.”



After receiving this support himself, Washington wanted to give back. Now, he's a father support specialist for Dad Together. He leads group discussions and makes first contact to build one-on-one relationships with potential participants.

“I want to be able to contact a father, find out what crisis he may be going through or what resources he may need,” Washington said, noting it may be as simple as being a person to talk to.

Classes and talking circles are [scheduled regularly](#) at the Burton Barr Central Library or at the Family Involvement Center in Phoenix. Through these events, dads learn how to resolve conflicts, cope with stressful family events, manage their kids' behavior and co-parent effectively.

“We're creating that dad army of nurturing fathers who can play both sides of this game, which is putting on our armor and our shield and taking on the day's work and then being able to come home, take that armor off and have that nurturing father moment at home,” Washington said.

But Dad Together isn't just about fathers. Justin Harty, assistant professor at Arizona State University's School of Social Work, acts as the research arm of the program. Both he and Casillas said Dad Together is also a long-term investment in child well-being, which includes preventing child abuse and neglect.

“In fatherhood research, we call it generative fathering. It's when fathers make contributions to their child that don't have direct improvements or outcomes or changes now but is an investment into their future,” Harty said. “And much of the work that Edward (Casillas) and Dad Together do I think transcends just immediate support.”

In pursuit of child well-being, Harty said the Dad Together team is planning to target programming to dads who are awaiting the birth of their child or have had children removed from their care. Harty also said it's important to provide services to fathers who have been in the foster care system themselves.

“They get a lot of services to help them transition into adulthood, but they receive virtually very few services to help them transition into young fatherhood, and so we're looking at ways that we can adapt Dad Together for that,” he said.

For Casillas, Dad Together is also about opening up. In particular, he said talking about the passing of his son two years ago lets others know they can get through the hardest of times.

“In the early stages of trauma, in the early stages of grief, I've shared my journey with everyone because I don't want them to give up, and there were times where I wanted to give up. ... I put one foot in front of the other. I got things done,” Casillas said. “I want to inspire or give hope to other fathers that no matter what happens, you still have a purpose. And there's something that you could do to support and help others.”