

Absence of Father Figure Has Lasting Effect

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THE LEDGER

Published: Sunday, April 26, 2015 at 11:50 p.m.

LAKELAND | The first time Kenneth Stephens saw his father was at a funeral.

Stephens was 44. His cousin had died of cancer and it was time for the family to say their last goodbyes.

Raised by his mother and stepfather, Stephens was standing outside of a church waiting for family to arrive. A black limousine crawled down the street. It stopped in front of the church. Out stepped Stephens' aunt — and a man whom Stephens had never seen before.

The man and Stephens' aunt walked to the church doorstep.

Stephens' aunt said, "There's someone I'd like you to meet."

Kenneth Stephens went to extend his hand and so did the strange man. At that moment, the aunt revealed to Kenneth that this man was his father.

"He dropped his hand. I dropped my hand and he walks by," Stephens said. "He didn't say something. I didn't say something."

Stephens said his father, who is still alive, never came to important events as he was growing up — a no-show at his high school graduation. Now, the Bartow native and military veteran has earned a doctorate degree and admits that "I can't attribute anything I have from this man."

Stephens said his father's absence has had a lasting effect on him, and that absence eventually became the fuel for why Stephens held a fatherhood forum at Southeastern University on Saturday.

Across Polk County and across the United States, hundreds of thousands of black male youth grow up without their fathers as role models to show them how to respect authority, interact with women and handle disappointments that come with everyday life.

As a result, many black male youth grow up idolizing rappers, athletes or actors.

At the forum, five panelists talked about their missing fathers and gave reasons why they believed black fathers have been absent.

"A lot of times the father wasn't around because he didn't want a child," said retired judge and author Robert Doyel. "He just wanted to have sex."

Doyel spent two decades as a family court judge. He said he has seen potential fathers go before his bench, try to get custody of their children, but ultimately lose.

Doyel said there's a perception among black fathers that child custody battles always go in favor of the mother, but often times that happens because the father can't show a history of being around.

"You gotta start being there from the beginning," Doyel said. "Showing up every four

weeks with a box of Pampers ain't gonna cut it. You gotta do it all the time."

Lanelle Pickett Sr., the pastor at Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church, said he believes it's tougher to be a father now than it was in previous generations because there is "so much vying for the time and interest of our children," including the Internet and 24-hour television.

"When I was growing up in South Carolina, there were three major television networks and we were restricted to where we could hang out," the pastor told the crowd of just less than 100 during the forum that lasted about 1½ hours.

Led by Stephens as the moderator, the panelists said conflict between the father and the child's mother helps contribute to why black fathers are absent.

Another factor is that fathers sometimes start new families with other women and want to spend more time concentrating on the new family, which pushes the first child out of the picture, the panelists said.

And mothers may withhold visitation hours from fathers if the father hasn't paid child support, the group said.

Sometimes, they said, even when the father is around, he may be so tied up in being a provider that he misses opportunities to teach his son.

"You can be a father and be there and not be there," said Stephens, who chairs the human services program at Southeastern.

Aside from the reasons the panelists discussed, absent black fathers aren't around because many of them can't get to their children.

Drawing from 2010 Census data, The New York Times estimates that 1.5 million black men are missing from the American population, mainly because they have either died at a young age or have been incarcerated.

Missing black fathers has become such a prevalent issue that President Obama in 2010 announced a plan to pump millions of dollars into nonprofit organizations that are aggressively working to get absent fathers more involved with their children's lives.

At the end of Saturday's panel, Stephens urged every man in the room to go online to a special web site and pledge to be a more active father. Stephens said he wanted 4,000 pledges before June 21 — Father's Day.

Stephens said he plans to use those names to apply for grants that will fund support groups for fathers looking to re-join their children's lives.

Bartow City Commissioner Leo Longworth, who attended the event, said local governments can help eradicate this issue by gathering more mentors for young black men and by drawing more attention to organizations like POPS, the Professional Opportunities Program for Students.

Other panelists included retired NFL player Kenneth Riley, graduate student Jarrett Williams and Brian Lafferty, a member of Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church.

They all had different experiences with their fathers, but all said this generation of fathers must be more active.

"Being part time in your child's life is better than not at all," Pickett, the pastor, said.

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