

Bryan Samuels Comments
Recipient of the 2018 Bernice Weissbourd Award for Family Support
Presented at the 2018 Family Focus Gala, May 15, 2018



“I have realized that nothing in my life I accomplished, have I accomplished alone. While this award seems a little bit premature for me, I realize it's never too early to say thank you to those who have made a difference in my life. Obviously, I wouldn't be here without my lovely wife, Gina. I wouldn't be here without my colleagues from Chapin Hall.

If you bear with me, I can even argue that I would not be here were it not for Family Focus. Family Focus is a really unique organization that continues to build the fabric of the community. It affirms the values of every member of the community and recognizes that all families need support. More than anything else, Family Focus embodies Bernice's humanity and her commitment to the well-being of all children.

For most of us, we can identify one or two moments in our life where we made a decision that changed the direction of our lives and ultimately led us to be the people we are today. Instead of talking about the experience of running DCPS or CPS or HHS, I want to talk about the moment when my life changed in an important way.

It was thirty years ago, and it happened when I walked into a Family Focus program in Lawndale. I happened to be a 22-year-old graduate student who was spending the summer as a government intern working on an economic development plan in North Lawndale and West Garfield Park. From the moment I arrived at Family Focus, the organization itself seemed familiar.

Certainly the neighborhood seemed familiar. North Lawndale was challenged with many of the same problems as the Roseland community I had grown up in on the south side of Chicago: concentrated poverty, few jobs, growing gang violence, and lots of single mothers. I, too, grew up in the home of a single mother, a mother who had very little support.

Thankfully, at a moment of crisis for my mother, there was a group of high school friends who did what we would call today “an intervention.” My mother's friends actually convinced her to place me and my two older brothers in a boarding school for kids from broken homes, in order that she would have time to get her life together, get the treatment that she needed, and, ultimately, to engage in our lives in a constructive way.

So I was placed in that boarding school when I was seven years old. It was a difficult adjustment. I felt abandoned. I was angry that my mother didn't work harder to get me back. I was frustrated that I couldn't get the other adults around me to give me what I thought I wanted. And I was disappointed. I was disappointed that I could not perform as well in school, or in the sports arena, or in social activities—and that was just at the first boarding school.

But then suddenly, something clicked. I realized that there was more to life. I moved from being a boy who was disappointed to a boy who was motivated by a conviction that there was a better way to live, and I did everything I could to get to that better place. Eleven years later, I graduated from high school. While I had

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the option of going to the University of Illinois, or Loyola, or even the University of Chicago, I actually decided to go to the University of Notre Dame, with the express intent of putting Chicago in the rear-view mirror, and never living here again.

Notre Dame turned out to be one of the great experiences of my life. It had all the same benefits of being in the boys' schools, except they had girls. I graduated from Notre Dame with honors and went to the School of Public Policy at Duke University. That was in North Carolina and I thought I could keep going south.

And then the plan that I had hit a snag. I came to Chicago for the summer between my first and second year of graduate school. I had this great internship in the Governor's office working on public policy issues, and it turned out that I was going to spend most of my summer in North Lawndale, working with the staff at Family Focus.

I worked with the staff and the community and the residents three or four times a week. I got to know them and I got to know the community. I also got a chance to see how I understood the world relative to my other colleagues.

In this work, Family Focus staff would drive to North Lawndale together and drive home together. On the way back we'd have these debriefing sessions where we would talk about what we experienced. Often, it was as if we were having two different conversations. The conversation I was having was about the abandonment these families were experiencing in the community or the anger that they couldn't provide more for their children than they were able to. They were worried or frustrated about the school system, that their child didn't have a purpose, and that they didn't have the kind of grit they would need to be successful. Families expressed the real conviction that something would have to change in the community. That was the conversation I thought we were having. What I realized by the end of the summer was that my childhood experience had the benefit of giving me some insight into the adversity and the trauma that many of the families that lived in North Lawndale were experiencing.

This is the point in the story where things turned. I decided not to go back to Duke. I stayed in Chicago. I transferred to the University of Chicago. I spent the next year working in North Lawndale, finishing what I started, and that's where I met Bernice. And as most of you can imagine—or you don't have to imagine because you know this first hand—she interrogated me. She asked all the hard questions, and then she affirmed everything I described to her and offered her support. She helped me get a job, she helped me get access to her professional network. She invited me to teach with her at the University of Chicago. She even helped when I wanted to get a job in the Obama Administration. I'm really grateful for the friendship with Bernice and the contributions she has made to my career.

I'll close by sharing a few quick thoughts. There are plenty of children in Chicago that feel abandoned or angry, or feel frustrated or disappointed, just as I did. And there are plenty of mothers like mine, who struggle to give their children the love and the care that they deserve. Just remember, those same kids can be motivated, purposeful, and have determination.

For all of the families that are supported by Family Focus, to all the staff, administrators, board of directors, and donors—the work that Family Focus does changes lives. I know that first hand. It changed my life, and I'm eternally grateful. Thank you.”



Bryan and Gina Samuels