Family Focus Gala Honors U.S. Senator Dick Durbin and ReaderLink Distribution Services President and CEO Dennis Abboud

Family Focus hosted its 43rd Anniversary Gala on May 28th with a sellout attendance of 400 guests honoring U.S. Senator Dick Durbin and ReaderLink Distribution Services President and CEO, Dennis Abboud.

The gala was held at the Four Seasons Hotel Chicago and was emceed by television journalist Rob Johnson. The event brought together national and state leaders to celebrate the work of Family Focus at seven centers located throughout Greater Chicagoland.

Governor JB Pritzker presented the Bernice Weissbourd Award for Family Support to U.S. Senator Durbin. The award is named for Bernice Weissbourd, founder of Family Focus and a nationally recognized leader in the family support movement.

Valerie Jarrett, former senior advisor to President Barack Obama, presented the Outstanding Corporate Partner Award to Dennis Abboud. Family Focus President and CEO Merri Ex was surprised with a special Bernice Weissbourd Award for Family Support presented for her leadership and contributions to support families in Chicago. The evening featured comments from Dr. Seun Adigun, D.C., a former Family Focus Evanston participant who gained notoriety by forming not only the first African bobsled team, but also by being part of the first Nigerian team to ever compete in the Winter Olympics.

Bernice Weissbourd said, “The thing that brings all of us together—Dick Durbin, JB Pritzker, Valerie Jarrett and Dennis Abboud—is an unstoppable belief in our shared ability to nurture children, from birth, in and with their communities.” The event raised $450,000 to fund Family Focus programs and services.

Experience the gala from home! Click below to:

- Download the Gala Program
- Watch the video
- Make Your Own Paddle
- Raise Donation
- Speaker comments and Anniversary Gala photos inside!
Excerpt from Senator Dick Durbin’s Gala Speech:

“When I was elected to the Senate a few years back, Ted Kennedy said, ‘There are an awful lot of people you’ve got to get to know in Chicago. The first person you need to get to know is Bernice Weissbourd.’ Time and time again, Bernice has opened doors, creating opportunities for families.

I remember a conversation I had with Eddie Johnson – a professional cop for more than 30 years. He said, ‘The hardest, worst thing I’ve ever seen is when I’ve sat down across the table from a 14-year old African American young man. He unloaded his automatic pistol into a house, killing a grandmother and the baby she was holding. I said to him, ‘What were you thinking?’ and he looked at me with the coldest eyes and said, ‘They shouldn’t have been in there.’ He was out trying to kill a member of an opposing gang. Johnson said, ‘I looked at him and said, ‘Where did this young man come from?’”

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Excerpt from Governor JB Pritzker’s Introduction of Senator Dick Durbin:

“I have been thrilled to have known Family Focus for many, many years. When I was much younger, Irving Harris, Bernice Weissbourd, and Barbara Bowman recruited me into early childhood, telling me that if you want to make a difference in the world, start with the most at-risk kids. This is how you can change the world. I took them seriously and followed their lead, and I’m thrilled to see all the progress that has been made at Family Focus and the amazing number of families that have been helped. I’m just thrilled.

Everyone in this room knows this: When we invest in our children and our families, we all gain a more prosperous future. When the fight for families faces the heavy resistance from nay-sayers who just think everyone should fend for themselves, it can be easy for elected officials in these moments to succumb to the dissonance and the gridlock, and let it go. But there are those who never do. There are a few leaders who realize that progress is possible, and who are willing to put in the hard work to make it so. A few leaders who do what’s right, even if it is not in their personal political interest.

Senator Dick Durbin has spent more than three decades as our representative in Washington, doing what’s right. He has advocated on behalf of Head Start, guaranteeing better outcomes for millions of children. He has fought for and secured federal funding for children’s healthcare, immunizations and asthma prevention. He hassled the United States Senate and the United States Congress as a whole to develop trauma-informed mental health services for children. He has championed the rights of the elderly and the undocumented. He knows the importance of family support knows no bounds of age or citizenship. He has shown us his deep empathy. He knows that children deserve a better future and that is within our power to make it so.

An award with Bernice Weissbourd’s name on it must only be given to men and women who have the most exemplary record of standing up and fighting for at-risk children. Tonight’s recipient of the award in Bernice’s honor has been relentless in putting in the work to get the job done, sometimes in the face of long odds, against opponents who thrive on ignorance, who thrive on apathy, and who thrive on downright malice. Tonight’s honoree has dedicated his life to fierce advocacy on behalf of children in Illinois and across this nation. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming home one of this state’s greatest public servants, a national leader and my dear friend, Senator Dick Durbin.”

Excerpt from Dr. Seun Adigun’s Participant Speech:

“Family Focus played an extremely integral part in becoming the woman that I am today. I’m thinking of a specific moment that happened over 20 years ago at Family Focus Evanston. I was nine years old, standing in Miss JoAnne’s class and we were doing an exercise where they asked, ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’

I said, ‘I’m going to be a female President of the United States!’ All my friends were looking at me like “Who does that? We’re fire-fighters and jobs like that.” And Miss JoAnne came over and said ‘You can be whatever you want to be. You want to be President? Go out there and be President.’

That moment - that one moment, changed the trajectory of the way I thought. She gave me the opportunity to dream, an opportunity to live, and opportunity to conquer the fear of anything I couldn’t understand at that moment. The breath of fresh air they gave me has trickled on to inspire the first and only African team to compete in both the winter and summer Olympic games.”
I grew up in a diverse community and was raised by a mother who was a single parent with my grandmother and two maternal aunts, so the importance of family isn’t lost on me. I learned about the kind of values we all share: be kind, share and show compassion. When we need direction, our values, like a personal compass, lead the way.

I also learned at an early age that you have to take the lead, whether it’s in business or good corporate citizenship. You must know what’s important and you have to secure the tools to succeed. Thomas Jefferson said, ‘I cannot live without books,’ and I agree. You can’t effect change without enlightenment, and you can’t have enlightenment without literacy. At ReaderLink, we are committed to improving communities through advancing literacy and promoting reading for education and for entertainment. We do that by collaborating with authors, publishers and retailers to bring relevant, curated content to the market. The ReaderLink Cares program has distributed more than $100,000 in community gifts feeding community members, building homes, supporting children’s hospitals, rescuing animals, and sharing compassion in the communities where ReaderLink lives and works. How we do that...

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Excerpt from Valerie Jarrett’s Introduction of Dennis Abboud:

“I have been fortunate to see the magic that can happen when you get the right people together. I experienced that early in my career when I worked for Mayor Harold Washington, and again when I hired a lawyer named Michelle Robinson to join my team before she became Michelle Obama. When another leader emerges to build upon and carry forth this foundation of greatness, it is a cause for celebration.

In just two years, Dennis has energized his ReaderLink team to become champions of Family Focus and 17,000 community members served. You can see it in Dennis’s face when he talks about witnessing ‘hope restored’ in communities facing unimaginable odds. Dennis Abboud has personally led the Board of Directors to create opportunities to provide a safe and secure financial position for the organization to do what it does best – embrace, educate and empower parents to create worlds of opportunity for our children.”

Family Focus’ mission is to promote the well-being of children from birth by supporting and strengthening families in and with their communities.
Senator Durbin’s Comments (Continued from page two)

“...I remember this moment in The Cat’s in the Cradle by Harry Chapen. ‘He came to the earth in the usual way.’ That’s the story of all these young people. They came to the earth in the usual way. And then what happened to them?

Bernice knew. Irving Harris knew. We all knew. They didn’t have a nurturing family. They didn’t have the love and guidance they needed. Then the world turns sharply, and they do things we find socially unacceptable, and tragic.

It used to be that the words ‘trauma informed’ was known by a handful of professionals. Now it’s become common parlance. With ACES—Adverse Childhood Experiences Survey—if you check a certain number of boxes, you can predict the effect, with almost certainly, what will happen physical and mentally to that person who was exposed to trauma. As someone said, ‘We can’t live in a country where biography become biology’. We’ve got to have those interventions that make the difference in the life of children before it’s too late. Before those cold eyes stare back at Eddie Johnson. Bernice knew that. And we know it too, don’t we? Inherently we know that if we are going to have the kind of country we want and need in this great nation, we need the families that can lead these children into better lives.”

Dennis Abboud’s Comments (Continued from page three)

“... is the same way Family Focus operates. With respect, with empowerment and accountability and with dedication to ourselves, our company and our community.

I wish I could take you to a Family Focus center with me. There is a moment that happens when you see a participant shift from being overwhelmed to seeing a pathway open. You can see it in their eyes. It’s the re-emergence of hope. I get emotional even thinking about it. Its an ‘Aha!’ moment when they realize ‘I can do this.’ Many of our participants find themselves on the brink of crisis or on the brink of discovery. Family Focus staff approach our participants—not as cases, but as people like us in need of a partner to open doors, listen with compassion, and remind them that they have the ability to succeed.

As business leaders, we play a vital role by providing critical problem-solving skills, contacts in communities and practical and clinical approaches to problem solving. Businesses and nonprofits both depend on vision and creativity. And when they come together, they not only generate great results. They make us each better, more in tune and more connected as we learn about ourselves and those we serve. It’s not only life-affirming for our participants and our community members. It’s life-affirming for us.”

A Thank You and Farewell to President and CEO Merri Ex

The Family Focus Board of Directors, donors, colleagues and friends extend their thanks to Merri Ex for eight years of service as Board Chair Vaughn Gordy announced her retirement in July. Below are excerpts from Merri’s comments at the gala:

“I am often asked how and why I entered the human services sector 45 years ago, right after graduate school. It all starts with family. If my family had stayed in Europe, they would probably have been killed in the Holocaust, as their families were. Immigrating takes courage and determination. I am very conscious of my family’s history and the privilege it provides me—first life, then education and two parents who loved me and gave me every opportunity to succeed. My first job in Chicago was as a bilingual community organizer at a settlement house, Erie Neighborhood House in Chicago’s West Town community. It was there that I learned how to work with a board, develop partnerships, create new organizations, raise money, and work with new immigrants to support them to participate in the American dream.

In 1980 I had my first daughter while I was on a three-month maternity leave from Erie House. Many of you know that I was then a participant at Family Focus experiencing the support that all parents need from every economic class. Family Focus has been part of my life for the past 38 years. I leave after eight and one half years with gratitude and optimism for the future of our organization. We are growing and able to serve more families with your support. Our board and staff are extraordinary. I am on my farewell tour visiting our seven centers from Aurora to DuPage to Englewood. We embrace each other with affection and respect. I am confident in our future.

I leave you with a challenge and quote from Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor, also an immigrant to this country who became a Nobel Peace Prize winner. He said, ‘Human suffering anywhere concerns men and women everywhere.’ I encourage you to be that person who can change the world.”