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Remarks at a Father's Day Event
June 21, 2010

Hello, everybody. Thank you. Everybody, please have a seat. Thank you very much. Let me just begin by making a few acknowledgements. First of all, I've got some outstanding fathers here in the first row who aren't seeing their kids enough because I'm working them all the time—[*laughter*]—three members of my Cabinet, Secretary of the Treasury Tim Geithner, Attorney General Eric Holder, and Secretary of Commerce Gary Locke, are here.

In addition, we've got one of my heroes and I'm sure one of yours, somebody whose shoulders I stand on and allowed me to become President of the United States, and that's Congressman from the great State of Georgia, John Lewis, is here. A fierce advocate on behalf of the District of Columbia, Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton is here.

I want to acknowledge the mayor of Washington, DC, Adrian Fenty in the house. The executive director of ARC, Edmund Fleet, is here. I want to thank all the panel discussion participants who are involved in today's events, and I want to thank Nurney Mason, a Washington, DC, icon. Nurney founded Mason's Barbershop in 1961—that's the year I was born—it's still going strong. He is here with his children and his grandchildren. Where is he? There he is right there. I could use a little trim so—[*laughter*]

One year ago this week, we kicked off a national conversation on fatherhood and personal responsibility, and members of our administration fanned out all across the country to hear from fathers and families about the challenges that they face. Secretary Arne Duncan, our Secretary of Education, held a discussion in New Hampshire about the link between fatherhood and educational achievement. Gary Locke talked to fathers in California about balancing the needs of their families with the demands of their jobs. Secretary Shinseki of Veterans Affairs held a town hall for military and veteran dads in North Carolina. And Attorney General Holder traveled to Georgia for a forum about fathers in our criminal justice system.

And in each of these places, each of these leaders posed a simple question: How can we as a nation—not just the Government, but businesses and community groups and concerned citizens—how can we all come together to help fathers meet their responsibilities to our families and communities?

And we did this because we know the vital role fathers play in the lives of our children. Fathers are our first teachers and coaches, or in my house, assistant teachers and assistant coaches—[*laughter*]—to mom. But they're our mentors, our role models. They show us by the example they set the kind of people they want us to become.

But we also know that what too many fathers being absent means—too many fathers missing from too many homes, missing from too many lives. We know that when fathers abandon their responsibilities, there's harm done to those kids. We know that children who grow up without a father are more likely to live in poverty. They're more likely to drop out of school. They're more likely to wind up in prison. They're more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol. They're more likely to run away from home. They're more likely to become teenage parents themselves.

And I say all this as someone who grew up without a father in my own life. He left my family when I was 2 years old. And while I was lucky to have a wonderful mother and loving

grandparents who poured everything they had into me and my sister, I still felt the weight of that absence. It's something that leaves a hole in a child's life that no government can fill.

So we can talk all we want here in Washington about issues like education and health care and crime. We can build good schools. We can put money into creating good jobs. We can do everything we can to keep our streets safe, but government can't keep our kids from looking for trouble on those streets. Government can't force a kid to pick up a book or make sure that the homework gets done. Government can't be there day in, day out to provide discipline and guidance and the love that it takes to raise a child. That's our job as fathers, as mothers, as guardians for our children.

Now, the fact is, is it's easy to become a father, technically. Any guy can do that. It's hard to live up to the lifelong responsibilities that come with fatherhood. And it's a challenge even in good times, when our families are doing well. It's especially difficult when times are tough, families are straining just to keep everything together.

In a time of war, many of our military families are stretched thin, with fathers doing multiple tours of duty far away from their children. In difficult economic times, a lot of fathers are worried about whether they're going to be able to keep their job or find a job or whether they'll be able to pay the bills and give their children the kinds of opportunities that if they didn't have them themselves, at least they wished for their children. And there are a lot of men who are out of work and wrestling with the shame and frustration that comes when you feel like you can't be the kind of provider you want to be for the people that you love.

But here's the key message I think all of us want to send today to fathers all across the country: Our children don't need us to be superheroes; they don't need us to be perfect; they do need us to be present. They need us to show up and give it our best shot, no matter what else is going on in our lives. They need us to show them—not just with words, but with deeds—that they, those kids, are always our first priority.

Those family meals, afternoons in the park, bedtime stories, the encouragement we give, the questions we answer, the limits we set, the example we set of persistence in the face of difficulty and hardship, those things add up over time, and they shape a child's character, build their core, teach them to trust in life and to enter into it with confidence and with hope and with determination. And that's something they'll always carry with them: that love that we show not with money or fame or spectacular feats, but through small daily acts; the love we show and that we earn by being present in the lives of our children.

Now, unfortunately, the way we talk about fatherhood in this country doesn't always reinforce these truths. When we talk about issues like child care and work-family balance, we call them "women's issues" and "mothers' issues." Too often when we talk about fatherhood and personal responsibility, we talk about it in political terms, in terms of left and right, conservative/liberal, instead of what's right and what's wrong. And when we do that, we've gotten off track. So I think it's time for a new conversation around fatherhood in this country.

We can all agree that we've got too many mothers out there forced to do everything all by themselves. They're doing a heroic job, often under trying circumstances. They deserve a lot of credit for that. But they shouldn't have to do it alone. The work of raising our children is the most important job in this country, and it's all of our responsibilities, mothers and fathers.

Now, I can't legislate fatherhood. I can't force anybody to love a child. But what we can do is send a clear message to our fathers that there is no excuse for failing to meet their obligations. What we can do is make it easier for fathers who make responsible choices and

harder for those who avoid those choices. What we can do is come together and support fathers who are willing to step up and be good partners and parents and providers.

And that's why today we're launching the next phase of our work to promote responsible fatherhood, a new, nationwide Fatherhood and Mentoring Initiative. This is a call to action with cities and States, with individuals and organizations across the country. From the NFL Players Association to the National PTA, to everyday moms and dads, we're raising awareness about responsible fatherhood and working to reengage absent fathers with their families.

As part of this effort, we've proposed a new and expanded Fatherhood, Marriage, and Families Innovation Fund. And we plan to seek out and support the very best, most successful initiatives in our States and communities, those that are offering services like job training or parenting skills classes, domestic violence prevention, all which help provide the kind of network of support for men, particularly those in vulnerable communities.

We're also going to help dads who get caught up—we want to make sure that they're caught up on child support payments and that we reengage them in their children's lives. We're going to support efforts to build healthy relationships between parents as well, because we know that children benefit not just from loving mothers and loving fathers, but from strong and loving marriages as well.

And we're going to—[*applause*]—we're also launching a new transitional jobs initiative for ex-offenders and low-income, noncustodial fathers, because these are men who often face serious barriers to finding work and keeping work. We'll help them develop the skills and experience they need to move into full-time, long-term employment, so they can meet their child support obligations and help provide for their families.

And under Eric Holder's direction, our Justice Department is planning to create its first Fathering Reentry Court for ex-offender dads and to help replicate this program in courts across the country. And the idea here is very simple: to reach fathers right as they're leaving the criminal justice system and connect them immediately to the employment and services they need to start making their child support payments and reconnecting them with their families.

And this program was inspired by leaders like Peter Spokes, who was the executive director of the National Center for Fathering, a good friend to many in our administration, all of whom were deeply saddened by his recent passing. And we are honored to have Peter's wife Barbara with us here today. Where's Barbara? I just saw her earlier. There she is. Thank you.

So these initiatives are a good start. But ultimately, we know that the decision to be a good father, that's up to us, each of us, as individuals. It's one that men across this country are making every single day: attending those school assemblies, parent-teacher conferences; coaching soccer, Little League; scrimping and saving and working that extra shift so that their children can go to college. And plenty of fathers—and men who aren't fathers as well—are stepping up to serve as mentors and tutors and big brothers and foster parents to young people who don't have any responsible adult in their lives.

Now, even when we give it our best efforts, there will still be plenty of days of struggle and heartache when we don't quite measure up—talking to the men here now. Even with all the good fortune and support Michelle and I have had in our lives, I've made plenty of mistakes as a parent. I've lost count of all the times when the demands of work have taken me from the duties of fatherhood. And I know I've missed out on moments in my daughters' lives that I'll never get back, and that's a loss that's hard to accept.

But I also know the feeling that one author described when she wrote that "to have a child is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body." [*Laughter*] Think about that: To have a child is to have your heart walking around outside your body.

I'm sure a lot of fathers here know that same memory that I have, of driving home with Michelle and Malia right after she was born, going about 10 miles an hour—[*laughter*]—your emotions swinging between unadulterated joy and sheer terror. [*Laughter*] And I made a pledge that day that I would do everything I could to give my daughter what I never had, that if I could be anything in life, I would be a good father.

And since—[*applause*]—and like a lot of the men here, since that time, I've found there's nothing else in my life that compares to the pleasures I take in spending time with my girls. Nothing else comes close to the pride I feel in their achievement and the satisfaction I get in watching them grow into strong, confident young women.

So over the course of my life, I have been an attorney, I've been a professor, I've been a State senator, I've been a U.S. Senator, and I currently am serving as President of the United States. But I can say without hesitation that the most challenging, most fulfilling, most important job I will have during my time on this Earth is to be Sasha and Malia's dad.

And that—[*applause*]—so you don't need a fancy degree for that. You don't need a lot of money for that. No matter what doubts we may feel, what difficulties we may face, we all have to remember, being a father is—it's not just an obligation and a responsibility, it is a privilege and a blessing, one that we all have to embrace as individuals and as a nation.

So happy Father's Day, everybody. God bless you. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:24 a.m. at the Town Hall Education Arts & Recreation Campus. In his remarks, he referred to Edmund Fleet, executive director, Building Bridges Across the River at THEARC. He also referred to his sister Maya Soetoro-Ng.

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