

The following is the text of the speech given by retired Georgia Supreme Court Chief Justice Leah Ward Sears at the Opening Plenary of the 2011 National Child Support Enforcement Association (NCSEA) Conference in Atlanta, Georgia on August 1, 2011.

Thank you, Commissioner Clyde Reese for that gracious introduction. And thank you to the National Child Support Enforcement Association for the opportunity to address this very important training conference of child support professionals.

As some of you may know, I retired from the judiciary 2 years ago with over 27 years on the bench. When I was a judge, I had a standard speech: I can't make a parent be a good mother or father. I can't make an adult walk the floor with a sick child, drive to soccer games and sit through them, run to Walgreen's at midnight to pick up a prescription, help with homework, go to a Boy Scout potluck dinner, or even do something as simple as smile at a child. But what I can do is squeeze a parent hard enough that money comes out, or send him or her to prison. And I had to do this many times.

When I gave this speech in court it was never really polished, as I was usually firing it rapidly at a dazed and confused custodial parent about five minutes before I walked into another hearing to hold another parent's feet to the fire for failing to support her kids. I was distressed, often, by the limits of what I could do as a state judge to target those who chose to float away and let someone else pick up the tab for their children, because I knew that when either a father or a mother skipped out on his or her family, it had lifelong repercussions on a lot of lives.

The ramifications were never just about an irresponsible parent failing to make his or her support payments. They were also about how the parent who stayed with the children had to work two jobs, never caught a break and sometimes had to take government assistance. Sometimes it was about a 10-year-old child coming to court with Mom, Smiling, but nervous with anticipation, wondering if the father who's been gone for months will even recognize her. It was also about how the kids often felt abandoned -- how their world fell apart when Dad left. And, yes, it was mostly men who did the leaving. Men who were not providing the support that they should be. I'm not talking about money.

"Fatherlessness is the most harmful demographic trend of this generation. It is the leading cause of declining child well-being in our society." This from David Blankenhorn, of the Institute for American Values in New York City. He writes that "the United States is becoming an increasingly fatherless society. A generation ago, an American child could reasonably expect to grow up with his or her father. Today, however, an American child can reasonably expect not to." This statement should be astonishing, unbelievable. Unfortunately, my experiences with our court system lead me to accept it as a simple truth. Our kids are growing up without fathers, and the results are proving disastrous at every level, from the effects on each individual child to society as a whole.

Blankenhorn hammers home his points with some alarming statistics: Tonight, about 40 percent of American children will go to sleep in homes in which their fathers do not live. Before they reach the age of eighteen, more than half our nation's children are likely to spend at least a significant portion of their childhood living apart from their fathers. Our nation's history is rife with both glorious triumphs of the human spirit and abysmal atrocities that many would like to erase from its pages. Until now, however, there has never been a time where the cohesion of the family unit was so disregarded. Children lost fathers to war or illness or accident, but there has never been a time when, after impregnating a woman, or, in some cases, a girl, one could simply "opt out" of fatherhood. There has never been a time when so many babies were born only to their mothers because the identity of a father is unknown. There has never been a time when so many children live without their fathers because of divorce. There has never been a time when the very concept of fatherhood was, at best, questioned, and, at worst, completely disregarded as nonexistent.

Of course, many moms have no choice but to rear their children without fathers because many fathers (in and out of their homes) have abdicated their responsibility for proper love, discipline, support and protection. The disastrous social consequences of these abdications are clearly evident and well

documented. Though many, if not most, single parents manage to bring up relatively well-adjusted kids with the help of extended families, churches and schools, the correlation between social deviancy and fatherless homes is irrefutable.

And, of course, not all fathers are separated from their children voluntarily -- many are forcibly removed by mothers who've bought into the lie that fathers aren't necessary. There are also mothers who just want to "upgrade." Under such circumstances, most courts provide fathers limited responsibility or visitation with their children, and only now are some states acknowledging the critical role fathers play in the lives of their children.

The problem is so rampant, however, that it now has a name. Fatherlessness. Let's think about that for a moment. Fatherlessness. A long, long time ago, in early hominid society, mothers gave birth to children and could easily identify a child as their own. Fathers were at a greater remove. Men could conceive a child and be long gone by the time the child is born. They could be on the scene, but feel deeply uncertain about whether the child is theirs. Yet while there was certainty built into the mother-child dyad, there was also vulnerability. Pregnant and nursing mothers face limits on how many resources and how much protection they can secure on their own. Somewhere along the way, cultures began to recognize that children were more likely to survive and societies were more likely to thrive when men—fathers—were recruited into the mother-child dyad. With that recognition, marriage was born. So, in effect, we started with fatherlessness. After eons of evolution, eons of painstakingly creating a civilized society, why would we want to go back to that? Why regress?

For argument's sake, let's say we're not regressing, but merely experiencing a shift in the family paradigm. Okay, fine. Are we so sure, though, that, this time, the shift is toward the betterment of society? Is it moving forward to say that men are unnecessary to childrearing and, in cases of either single-parent or dual-parent households where the children are, in effect, raised by childcare facilities because everyone works, are the children and, by extension, is society, growing and becoming more productive and Utopian? Everyone's roles have changed. But whether they have changed for the better remains to be seen. Let's consider some of the repercussions fatherlessness has on our current society by listening to some sobering statistics and apt quotations: The Center for Disease Control, the Department of Justice and the Bureau of the Census report: Of the 30% of children who live apart from their fathers, they will account for 63% of teen suicides, 70% of juveniles in state-operated institutions, 71% of high-school dropouts, 75% of children in chemical-abuse centers, 80% of rapists, 85% of youths in prison, 85% of children who exhibit behavioral disorders, and 90% of homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes. Children born to unwed mothers are ten times more likely to live in poverty as children with fathers in the home. "The causal link between fatherless children and crime is so strong that controlling for family configuration erases the relationship between race and crime and between low income and crime," notes social researcher Barbara Dafoe Whitehead. More to the point, a counselor at a juvenile-detention facility in California, which has the nation's highest juvenile-incarceration rate, protested, "[If] you find a gang member who comes from a complete nuclear family, I'd like to meet him ... I don't think that kid exists." "Maturity does not come with age, but with the accepting of responsibility for one's actions," writes Dr. Edwin Cole. "The lack of effective, functioning fathers is the root cause of America's social, economic and spiritual crises."

Here is the truth -- and it is a hard truth for men who have abandoned their families, but a harder truth for their children: Most social problems -- crime, drug abuse, unwed pregnancy and abortion, youth suicide, school dropouts, domestic violence, and the like -- are the direct consequence of fatherless households. Why do so few look to fatherlessness as the cause and seek to start reform there? Why do we continue, when we recognize the role fatherless ness plays, to demand only financial support from fathers, and not that they be present to help nurture and raise their offspring? We know that fatherlessness is caused largely by two things: unwed childbearing and divorce. Unmarried mothers and the males who impregnate them account for one of every three babies born. One of three!! These babies grow up in fatherless homes, and that becomes the standard for them. They don't have the benefit of a father's wisdom, guidance, love, no, but what's far worse is that they never knew such things existed. They cannot miss what they do not know exists; they will only propagate that which they have learned." My father wasn't here. Why should I stick around for my kids?" The same can be said for divorce. With the dissolution of

the sanctity of marriage, divorce becomes rampant; when divorce is rampant, our youth take the sanctity of marriage far less seriously. "My parents got divorced. If I decide I don't like being married, I will, too." Of course that apathy, that disregard for the family, for love, for life, leads to crime, violence, intolerance and hate.

How do we break these terrible cycles? For starters, we can pay attention to the positive statistics, too: "Children who grow up with their fathers do far better -- emotionally, educationally, physically, every way we can measure -- than children who do not," says David Blankenhorn. "This conclusion holds true even when differences of race, class and income are taken into account. The simple truth is that fathers are irreplaceable in shaping the competence and character of their children." Share this statistic: People have only a 10 percent chance of living in poverty if they will

- o Get a high school diploma
- o Wait until they are at least 20 years old to marry
- o Not have a child until after marriage

I cannot underestimate the weight of this next statement: What each and every one of you in this room does on a daily basis, what you have devoted your lives to, is the greatest step toward reversing fatherlessness and restoring the family unit. I thank you for that. And, if you'll allow me to brag on my home turf little bit, Georgia ranks 28th nationally in current support, and this fine state received the 2010 NCSEA Most Improved Program Award. That's moving forward. We can join them and all the states that are working hard in this endeavor. We can, together, urge our schools, churches, synagogues, community organizations and government to advocate for family cohesion. We can rally to present the government with a choice: they can spend our money on the play pen or the state pen. We can continue to support the work of Problem Solving Courts to keep non-custodial parents out of jail and in their children's lives. We can support the growth of grassroots groups like A Call to Fatherhood, whose mission is to spread their fatherhood movement, espousing the notion that to be a father is far, far more than simply producing sperm and paying child support.

We can call upon our forefathers and mothers for sage advice. Founder John Adams understood the crucial importance of the family unit well when he said: "The foundation of national morality must be laid in private families.... How is it possible that Children can have any just Sense of the sacred Obligations of Morality or Religion if, from their earliest Infancy, they learn their Mothers live in habitual Infidelity to their fathers, and their fathers in as constant Infidelity to their Mothers?" And his dear wife, Abigail Adams, said, "What is it that affectionate parents require of their Children; for all their care, anxiety, and toil on their accounts? Only that they would be wise and virtuous, Benevolent and kind."

We can, as A Call to Fatherhood encourages, come together as men and women, black and white, rich and poor, all committed to restoring the fatherhood and the family as the right of every child, the sure expectation of every mother, and the joyful obligation of every man who helps to bring a baby into this world.

Thank you so much for this opportunity to share with you my thoughts. Best of luck on a wonderful conference here in my beloved city, in a nation we must all keep great.