

Fifth Annual Pediatric Leadership Luncheon
Making a Difference in a Child's Life

Providence Hospice of Seattle Foundation
Safe Crossings Foundation

September 23, 2004
Seattle, WA

Keynote Address
Kevin Sweeney

NOTE: Italicized sections are quotes from Kevin Sweeney's book Father Figures.

Here's what I'd like to do this afternoon. I want to tell a few stories. Read a few stories, actually. And I'll do so with a purpose. I want to get right at the heart of today's theme: Making a difference in a child's life. And as I share these stories, I'll ask you to think about that – to think about the prospect of making a difference in a child's life.

So here I go.

"Your daddy has died," Grandma Fallon said. "Your daddy has died."

That's the first paragraph. In TV journalism, they call it a hard start. You might even call it that in life: a hard start.

While the book starts off at a sad point – an unbearably sad point – it's not a sad story. That's because I did not have a sad childhood. I was a pretty happy kid. I am, knock on wood, a pretty happy adult. My father's death was not destiny. It was a big factor in shaping who I am. But there were other big factors – other people. People who made a difference in the life of a child.

I came across some of those people in an unusual way.

When I was eight years old, I became worried that I might not be a good father. I worried that, without observing a man, a father, on a daily basis, I might never know what to do when my time came. How would I know what to say in a father-son chat if I had never before been in one? How would I know how to stand up and be a man – if that's what men did? It was a big worry – an obsession.

So I developed a strategy. I've always done that – develop strategies. (It's a personality trait that drives my kids nuts. When we play board games or card games, they know that once I have a strategy, I won't waver – and the fun drains out of it for everyone else.) I picked out three men to act as my surrogate fathers. I would follow them whenever I could, watch how they treated their sons and wives, watch how they walked and carried themselves, watch them as they visited our home. I would *stalk* them through my childhood – that's not a term I used then, but it's really what I did. I didn't tell them about this plan – that was far too scary. It would have shown an

emotional need that I didn't want to reveal. But I did what I said I would do – I followed them whenever I could. And I learned a great deal from them.

I'm going to read a few short passages from the book. And you'll see a common theme in all of them – again, it gets back to today's theme of making a difference in the life of a child.

This first passage is about one of my father figures – Sherm Heaney. I played basketball with his son Dennis, who is now a US Army Ranger based up here at Fort Lewis. This comes late in the book, it's during basketball season of my senior year in high school.

No matter where or when we played, Sherm was there. For afternoon games, he showed up in his suit, a car full of work no doubt awaiting the game's end. He might be a few minutes late, but he would be there ultimately.

When Sherm spoke up from the stands, it was only as encouragement. He would speak at a point when the crowd was quiet enough – a few seconds or so after the play was made – so the player involved might actually hear the compliment or encouragement. "Nice pass, Denny," he'd say to his son, as a timeout was called. "Nice screen, Kev," he'd say to me a few moments after a teammate had scored. Sherm noticed the fundamentals. He encouraged Dennis to take his shots, but it was the screens, assists and rebounds that made his heart soar.

After games, a small handful of parents and friends would mill about in the foyer outside the locker room. Sherm was always one of them; he was always there. He had questions and comments for his son. And he had a question and comment for me. Something specific, something unique about the game and my relation to it. He asked me, directly, about a particular play.... A few tips and we parted ways, he and Dee going home, while Dennis and I and our friends went to wherever the night's meeting point was. I walked out of locker rooms all across San Francisco and San Mateo County, and there was always a dad there, ready to ask me questions and talk to me about the game. The cumulative impact of his steady presence was powerful.... One of my chosen fathers was always there. If Sherm had failed to show at a game just once, I would have missed him.

He made a difference in the life of a child. He taught me that the first rule of being a dad is to show up. He just showed up. He was there for his son, sure. But he was also there for me. So quite often, we make a difference in very subtle ways.

There were other times, though, when my father figures were more direct.

Chick Kelly was a big, burly butcher – the biggest, strongest man I knew. He looked me in the eye when he spoke to me. He'd hold my arm and ask me a question. He'd hold it gently, but long enough to show he actually wanted to have a conversation.

This passage comes when I was a sophomore in high school and getting in a great deal of trouble. I was drinking – a lot. And I was ignoring my mom; she said to be home at midnight, and I got home when I felt like it. Until Chick Kelly stepped in.

We were at their house on a weekend night. It was not a big visit; only a few kids from each family were around. After the table had been cleared and the dishes done, Chick suggested that he and I sit at the table for a minute. My mom and Dolores were talking

quietly in the living room; all the others were out of sight. I could tell that this was about something awkward, perhaps even troubling.

His voice was strong and soothing, but it was also clear that what he was saying was not easy for him. He fumbled through a few sentences about how powerful alcohol could be, and I now knew the topic. I had known for some time that my mother was troubled by my behavior; now someone else was. Chick clearly knew at least as much as she did, and probably a lot more. Perhaps my mom had raised it with him; perhaps one of his sons had given him the details. He didn't say I had been drinking – he didn't accuse me of anything – but my drinking was silently acknowledged by both of us.

Chick cut to the chase.

“The way you're acting is hurting your mother, and I won't tolerate that,” he said.

I felt stricken and must have looked it. I couldn't say anything in response, but nodded my head, as if to say “yes.” After a long silence, he changed his tone.

“I don't think you're becoming the man you want to be,” he said. “You're not on the way to becoming the man I know you can be.”

He said that he knew there was something in me, something special. He said I had shown him I had the potential to be a good man. I wasn't on the right path just then, he said, but he had faith that I soon would be. He told me he knew I would make better choices. He knew I would....

I was astonished. He was both strong and loving, an obvious combination, but not one I had noticed before. He had shown faith in me. He wasn't trying to slap me down or stamp me out, but sought to unleash the good that was there in me. A topic that had always gravitated toward self-hatred had been reshaped. He was telling me not to be so hard on myself – but to start being smart. I knew I didn't want to disappoint my mother, but Chick reminded me that I didn't want to disappoint myself. I had choices. A man had choices. This is what I inferred, then and later, from the conversation.

For so many years, I had hung on his every word. I had watched him with his sons, with his wife, with my mother. Now, I was no longer mere observer; I was the subject. I had always been aware of a detachment between my chosen fathers and me, but now the distance was gone. I was engaged in a father-son chat with a father I had chosen.

He made a difference in the life of a child. He showed me that a good man respected women – his starting point was to speak to me about how I was treating my mother. And he showed me strength – the strength to take on difficult topics. When I need strength, I still think back to his dining room table.

There is another theme that I had include if I was to tell a complete story. We did not talk about our father – not for 17 years. He died in 1962, and that's what people did back then. Or at least it's what Irish Catholic families like ours did. The adults made a choice – they wanted us to move on, to be happy – and so we dealt with our sadness by suppressing it. I can't be judgmental about it. My mom did the best she could; she just didn't know. She was a 34 year-old widow with six kids and no money – she had no time to know. But I needed to write about this because I

didn't want families to believe that if their son found a few mentors, he'll be fine. It takes more than that. It takes open and honest communication.

This passage comes right after I've described how broke we were, and how hard it was for my mother.

Amidst all of this, twenty bucks a month went to St. Robert's Church. Every week, mom subtly placed a fiver in the envelope and dropped it in the collection basket. She never raised the topic of tithing with us, but I occasionally asked how much she gave, mostly because I found it stunning and wanted to hear her say it out loud. I was proud of her, though I never thought to say so. My mom was getting beaten up financially – something big was always breaking – but there appeared to be nothing that could knock her out. If there was bad news in the middle of the week, she brushed herself off and smiled as she dropped the envelope in the basket. It was impressive.

As the offertory hymn was sung during mass, I listened to the sounds of the basket being passed. I grew to dislike the sound I was listening for intently, the sound of tumbling coins. My mom was dropping in paper, real money, and some of those coins were falling from the hands of dads or from families that I knew had money. Pocket change was all they had for the priests. Shame on them, I thought, and I slipped into anger and resentment just before the Gloria and the Consecration itself.

Jealousy seemed petty to me, or perhaps it was labeled as petty by our mom and by the priests, so I couldn't allow myself to feel jealous for those kids whose families had more money than mine. And jealousy was linked in obvious ways to sadness, which we knew was a room we were not to enter. I settled in to a comfortable anger. When I could justify it with righteousness – these people weren't giving the church its due – it felt perfect and natural. I wasn't petty, I thought: I was right. I was angry and I was right.

Not a healthy place for a young man – clinging to a righteous anger. And now I jump to a time when I was in High school, when, as I said earlier, I was drinking a great deal.

Drinking at games was a result of peer pressure, something that might have been obvious if I had stopped to think about it. Drinking at dances was different, though, and I fully understood my reasons for doing so. I was petrified. I had no problems meeting girls at dances or parties. I could meet anyone; Keefe and I both could. I could walk up to the prettiest girl at a party, introduce myself, and entertain her – and all of her friends – for an hour in the kitchen. But I could not ask for her phone number. I could not ask her to dance. As a little boy, I could not express my sadness; as a big boy, I could not profess my love. If I could never say I was jealous, how could I say I desperately wanted something, or someone? I couldn't recognize the connections then, that the suppression of one emotion might lead to the suppression of another. I just knew I could not find the words.

I think most families today – particularly those connected to a wonderful community like this one – would know not to do this. But I'm speaking now to people outside of the families directly affected. The one thing I wish neighbors had done when I was a child, and the one bit of advice I would give to those wanting to help, to make a difference, is this: Ask a question – just one question. Or tell a story – one very tiny story. It's an opening, and the child might not take the bait. They might just move on. But every so often, they might ask a follow-up question. It might

lead to something. It might legitimize a topic that could otherwise be scary. But, again for people outside the family, it's important for the child to set the pace.

I'll move on to another story.

There is no way Tommy Lara could have known about his impact on me. I'll preface this by saying that even at a very young age, I could tell that his was going to be a hard life. And he has.

Tommy wore his long hair slicked back, and his chin usually bore several days growth. His car could be heard blocks away, and he generally pulled up just a few minutes after practice was to start, figuring his kids could warm up without him. He was loud, and cussed in the presence of young boys. He often looked as if he had been through a lot, though at twelve I wasn't quite sure what that meant. I just know that he looked much older than he was, and he was in his late twenties.

We were a miserable team and I in particular was having a miserable year hitting. I don't know if I had gotten a single hit halfway through the season, a nearly unbearable stretch. One day, Tommy asked me – told me, rather – to stay after practice so we could work on my hitting. Over the course of the next five days, he gave me three hours of his time. Me alone with Tommy Lara, for an hour on three different days.

“We're gonna break this down, Sweeney,” he said. “You're gonna hit the darn ball. I'm gonna teach you, and you're gonna be a darn hitter.” At that point, I would not have believed those words from a single person, especially not him. I was more touched than excited.

(I will add here that Tommy did not use the word “darn.” He didn't even use the word “damn.” Use your imagination – he was able to find words that caught our attention. But for an audience of this size, I'll use a bit more discretion.)

Tommy Lara did break it down. Like a hung over dance teacher, he fumbled with the words and descriptions, turning away to cough every now and then, but was able to isolate each of the necessary body movements. He opened my stance dramatically. Instead of positioning myself so that I faced home plate and looked at the pitcher over my left shoulder – the traditional batter's position – he had turned my body so that I squarely faced the pitcher. He told me to choke way up on the bat, so that on a thirty-inch bat, only twenty inches of wood remained above my hands. I held the bat parallel to the ground, and as he pitched, I was to lift my left foot straight up and move it slightly toward the pitcher. He had me use only a half swing, starting with the bat over the plate, prodding me to draw my face as close to the ball and bat as I could while making this abbreviated swing. He wanted my eyes wide-open, watching cowhide hit wood from a distance of a foot or so. By cutting down on my movements, he created a process where I would essentially watch the ball reach my bat. By the end of the hour, I must have hit fifty balls in a row. None went past the pitcher's mound, but that wasn't the point.

“You hit the darn ball Sweeney!” he shouted. “You're gonna be a darn hitter!”

(Again, his language was much more colorful.)

Two days later, at our next session, he moved my left foot a few inches, so that it was now pointing towards third base. When I stepped into the ball on this day, I was to move it

more clearly towards the oncoming pitch. All of the action was right there in front of me; I was still facing the pitcher. My swing was now at three-quarters, and the hit balls did not go far – but I hit every pitch in or near the strike zone. On our third meeting, he again moved my front foot, so it was now pointed towards shortstop. The length and speed of my swing increased, but now he talked about using my wrists, snapping them quickly to punch the ball into a hole between the shortstop and third baseman, or delaying the snap to send the ball into a hole on the right side. I could control my bat speed by being aware of my wrists – when and how quickly they snapped.

In a week, I had gone from dreading every at bat, fearing every pitch, to deciding where I wanted to hit a pitched ball. I still couldn't hit it far, but I could hit a baseball.

Our next game was at windblown Lion's Field, and John Maxotopolis had already mowed down eight San Bruno Merchants by the time I got to the plate in the third inning. He was a barrel-chested fireballer, and not a single one of my teammates had even managed to hit a fair ball. As I stood in the box, my stance evoked the tiny Latin shortstops who played in the major leagues then; they were slap hitters with comical stances, but they controlled their bats well and made their living with speed and cunning. I had no speed, but I now had cunning. With my wooden Frank Robinson bat, I made contact with the first pitch, a fastball. The ball shot toward the hole in the right side of the infield, where the second baseman made what I thought was a lucky grab of a ball skimming off its first hop. I was out at first but don't recall ever feeling more satisfied. I had hit a shot, and it took a good play to get me out.

Tommy Lara, standing in the coach's box at third base, didn't say a thing. He didn't say I had hit the darn ball or that I was a darn hitter. But he had a huge, closed-mouth smile and stared at me from the third base coaching box as he clapped, loudly and deliberately, for a long, long time. He turned away, pulled his cigarettes from his back pocket, and lit up. He knew it and I knew it. I was a darn hitter.

I'll add here that now I wasn't using the word darn. And I'll skip ahead here.

Baseball is just a game, and hitting the ball is only part of the game. But those days with Tommy Lara were an important passage, one that feels, in hindsight, as if it made all other passages possible. It was important to me that I succeed at baseball, at least to a certain extent. It was important to me that my success came not because I was gifted but because I had worked.

Tommy Lara wasn't the kind of coach parents liked, at least not then. He wasn't a model citizen and wasn't the kind of role model I was seeking. But during one week before my eighth-grade year, he gave me one of the great lessons a child can learn. It wasn't just that he taught me to hit a baseball. For that one week, I was the most important person in the world to him; I was his one project. His level of commitment led to magic. He taught me that we could break it down, that we could take a complex problem and figure it out, step by step.

I flash forward to a moment when I was 27 years old and walking out of Sen. Gary Hart's office. I had just been asked to go to Iowa, to crisscross the state, and start signing up the best organizers. Hart was running for President of the United States, and my trip was the first major step in organizing ground troops. A presidential campaign is a huge undertaking, and a very scary one. But I walked out of that office, and I could hear Tommy Lara saying: "We're gonna break this

down, Sweeney.” You take a big scary thing and you break it down into simple steps. He was using bats and balls, but he was teaching me, really, about something so much bigger. (If there is something bigger than hitting a baseball.)

I want to go back to one more passage about my father figures. They were not men who gave speeches. They weren’t great speakers, if we think of that as public speaking. This passage is from my senior year in high school.

In April, a girl invited me to the Mercy High School Senior Ball. I had been away on the trip to Washington when Crestmoor’s big dance was held, so this was it: my high school swan song. It would be a special evening, with dinner at a restaurant – still a novel event for me – and dancing in San Francisco. Parties would extend late into the evening and early morning, so there was no curfew on this night; my mom trusted me, and four o’clock in the morning, or even later, would be acceptable. I simply had to promise not drive drunk, a promise I kept.

It was on a Saturday, and after leaving the deli early at three o’clock in the afternoon, I used the family car to pick up my rented Tuxedo.

When I returned home from the rental shop, Chick Kelly was waiting at the door.

He was there with George Schaumeffel, an old family friend whose late wife, Paulette, had been a close friend to Auntie Anne and to my mom. They dropped by, unannounced, to help me get dressed. I took a shower and shaved, though I most likely didn’t need to do the latter. As I stood in my room in my boxers, the two men acted as my valets. George unzipped the plastic bag from the rental shop, laying the garments neatly on the bed, taking his time in doing so. Chick brushed the patent leather shoes with his sleeve, and the three of us talked as I slowly and deliberately dressed and was dressed. George buttoned the suspenders to the back of my pants, and each man took a strap, pulling it over my shoulders, fumbling with the buttons as they affixed them in the front. I held my arms out as they inserted cuff links, and held my arms up as they wrapped the cummerbund. I felt their hands on my stomach and shoulders as they turned me this way and that, much as a barber does while cutting hair. There was teasing and banter, and talk of dances they had been to long ago. It was a nice and long conversation, with Chick interrupting occasionally to say, “You look great. You look great.”

I took forever to lace up the shoes, not wanting the moment to pass, this moment when men were dotting on me and acknowledging some right of passage. I sat on the edge of my bed for a long time, as they leaned against the walls and kept talking. It felt as if none of us wanted the conversation to wane. As they helped me slip on the dark blue tuxedo jacket with the black lapels, Chick said it again, “You look great.” He shook his head as he did so, implying, to me at least, that so much time had passed, that so much had happened.

We talked with my mom in the living room, and she took a photo of the three men – George, Chick and me. I kissed her good-bye and then hugged George. When I hugged Chick, he held me close and told me to have fun. He again said I looked great.

He made a difference. He made note of important events. He was there. And he told me I looked great! It’s not that hard!

I want to close with one last story.

This book grew out of a tiny little essay I wrote for Salon.com in the wake of September 11. I wanted to reach out to men in the communities where victims had lived, to help them see that they might play a role in helping children who had lost a parent. I thought I would write it, maybe have an impact on one or two families, and that would be it. But I received more than 100 e-mails in the next two days. And most of those notes were from families that had lost a parent. They were from surviving parents who clung to the hopeful message. They liked hearing that joy might someday return to their lives, that their lives might someday be normal again. A different kind of normal – but normal. I also received a call from a book publisher – I had never imagined turning this into a book before her call.

So as I wrote, I did not want to write something maudlin, something sad. As I said, I was a pretty happy kid. I tried to stay focused on a hopeful message. And as I mined my childhood, I found a great many hopeful stories – and many reasons to stay hopeful.

This is from my first year at St. Robert's Catholic Grammar School.

Sister Theophane was scary and firm, not the kind of teacher children loved, even first graders. But she loved sports, like all of the nuns at our school, and she wheeled in a television set so we could watch World Series games. She told us stories about Wally Bunker, another six year-old boy she had taught to read. Only five years after graduating from St. Roberts, Wally, at the age of nineteen, was pitching in the major leagues for the Baltimore Orioles. He threw his blistering fastballs – the ones his dad taught him right there in San Bruno Park – and in his first full year in the majors, he won win nineteen games, lost only five, and threw two one-hitters. He was, as baseball scouts say, a phee-nom, and a million American boys wanted to be him. But when I was in first grade, he was still just ours. He was our guy, and he was coming back to St. Roberts.

We took half a day to prepare for Wally Bunker Day, cleaning our classroom, and making pennants with his name on them. Half were blue and red, the St. Roberts colors; half were orange and black, the colors of an Oriole cap. These we taped to our rulers and waved as he drove up Oak Avenue in his Avanti sports car. He was so big, it seemed, that he could barely fit through the doors. But he managed, and he came and went in a flash. Later that day, Sr. Theophane pulled me out of the classroom. She warned that what she was about to tell me was something I could not tell any of the other boys, because they would be very jealous. I gave my word that I would not, a promise she knew that I would keep – she had that much confidence in her power.

“Kevin Sweeney,” she said, looking right into my eyes. “Do you know who sat in the very seat you’re sitting in today?”

“No sister, I do not,” I answered, again having trouble taking in a breath, and afraid to ask who.

“Wally Bunker did.”

She said nothing more, and didn't have to. A wrinkled nun in her sixties had found the right thing to say, the right way to tell me that I could do anything I wanted to. It wasn't until the eighth grade that I found out she had said the same thing to many boys that week. By then, her work was done: she had allowed me to have an ego. Boasting or

talking about one's self could still draw a reprimand, at St. Roberts and at home, but it was OK to believe, OK to know that you could do great things. It was OK even to talk about it quietly, knowingly, in the hallway.

Wally began having arm troubles his second full year, and his injuries kept him from meeting the potential he showed as a rookie. But in 1966, when I was a third grader, he won four crucial games in September, as the Orioles made a successful run at the American League pennant. He earned the right to pitch in the World Series. And he was magnificent, becoming only the sixth player ever to pitch a complete game, 1-0 shutout victory in a World Series game. It was a day when our town stood still. Absolutely still. It was our brush with greatness. I would think of this day often as I rode my bike past his family's house, just six blocks from our own. A kid from St. Robert's could do great things, even if the breaks went against him.

I want to thank the Providence Hospice of Seattle Foundation and the Safe Crossings Foundation for inviting me here today. But mostly, I want to thank them, and all of you, for the work that you do. I have so much respect for what you do. And I am deeply grateful to you for doing it.

Thank you.

Book excerpts are from: Father Figures, Three Wise Men Who Changed a Life, published by ReganBooks, an imprint of HarperCollins publishers.

For more information, see: www.fatherfigures.org