

Leon McCowan: It's my pleasure to introduce Lydia Vélez Esteves. Was I close? All right. She's a parent advocate, experienced trainer, and community organizer, who spearheaded an information and referral program that offered legal information on child support, child custody, and labor laws to parents.

She is the founder and executive director of – and she changed the name, and she told me in the back – Sin Barreras, Incorporated – change the name – in Puerto Rico, where she continues to develop and implement programs that help parents effectively navigate the social and legal system, as well as providing training on fatherhood issues. Now, I met her in my child support experiences, and we were able to have her in one of our annual child support training conferences in Washington.

In fact, we heard her in Oregon, and Michelle Jefferson, who was the director of Training and Technical Assistance, said, “We’ve got to have her at the conference.” And so she was invited, and she did an outstanding job. So help me warmly welcome our featured speaker. (Applause)

Lydia Vélez Esteves: I'm shrinking as I get older – obviously. Good morning! [Audience: Good morning!] Buenos dias! [Audience: Buenos dias!] See, I'm an advocate – I have lots of energy. Do you have any? (Cheers) Well, I've got to get away from this because, as an advocate, I need contact, OK? So we're going to do that...and try not to fall. Wow! Seven years ago when I talked about fatherhood, they said, “No way, no how, not working. That's not going to happen. Kill it, kill it, kill it.” Gentlemen, is it happening? [Audience: Yeah!] (Applause)

Ladies, are we relieved? [Audience: Yeah!] (Applause) Holy cow! What I'm trying to say here is that I'm stepping away from this because I have a fifteen-year-old daughter who said to me, “Mommy, trash the speech.” And she's my hero. And I thought, OK. So I'm going to open the door to something I've never done before, which is to my personal life.

And I hope that you won't focus on my bad outfit or my bad stockings or god knows what my hair is doing at this point, but that you would really focus on the fact that I am going to be brave enough to share with you why I think fatherhood is important, but, most of all, why my daughter thinks it's important. But let me start with this. There are three Head Start programs that I had the blessing to work with. And I say “a blessing” because I have not met any other community who is willing to work for so little money. (Laughter and applause) Sorry – had to say it.

I'll never get invited again after this one. I hear the Feds over there, saying, “She did not have to say that.” But they're going to talk to you about great opportunities coming up in 2005. However, you go to work with a smile. You help us raise our children. (Applause) My daughter's going to be sixteen years old, going on fifty, which...sometimes it feels like she's fifty. But let me tell you about these three programs. I used to be the child support director for the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund. Pretty easy job, right? I worked for a women's rights organization.

I was going to speak to women. I was going to be their legal advocate on what? Child support. It was pretty simple – you don't pay, you go to jail, right? No. Well, here I was doing training for moms and dads, but separately, because somebody decided it's not good to put mom and dad in the same room. You'll never get anything done. OK. So, here I was at one of my trainings, and this woman, who was a participant in my training, decided that she would bring her fiancé to my training. He was the only guy in my training. And as he walked in – women, we have a look, don't we?

You all know what I'm talking about, right? My mother still gives it to me. And we all do it. But as this gentleman walked in, the women looked at him, like, “Where's he going? It does say ‘Child Support’ out there, right?” And so he sat there, and twenty minutes into my presentation, he said, “I have a question.” And I thought, “Oh, lord. Oh, you're not going to make it.” And he said, “Why aren't you doing these trainings for men?” And I thought, “I do. I go to prisons. I go to churches. I...” He said, “You do?” And I said, “Yes.”

He said, “Because you're the first woman that I've heard who's not bitter, angry, or wants to kill us.” (Laughter) And I thought, “Wow! Really?” And then he said, “Yes. All the information we get is about ‘pay – go to jail, pay – go to jail,

pay – go to jail.' Men are scared. They're not getting the same information.” That's how I got into fatherhood – one guy. Well, I did make a mistake, as my boss – my ex-boss – still calls it. I gave out my phone number. (Laughter) And I said, “Oh, if you have any questions, just call me.” Have any of you done that?

How many of you have learned never to talk about what you do for a living on an airplane, anywhere where you have to be in a place with people where you can't get away? Right? How many of us have learned? (Laughter and applause) I love the fact that not everybody picked up your hand because you're Head Start. How could you not share with people what you do for a living? You're taking care of our children. Well, let me just tell you. I'm going to tell you about those three centers. I played this game with my daughter who, like I said, is going to be sixteen.

And I pick her up from Head Start, and we would do this game all the time, we would play this game, and I would... “Tell me if I'm right or wrong.” So I picked her up, and I asked her – this time we were doing colors – and I said, “Red.” And obviously I was wrong and that's why she needs to be right – this was the purpose of the game, right? – for her to tell me. And she said, “Mommy, stop.” She said, “You have to go to school tomorrow.” And there was this immediate burning sensation in my stomach, and I said, “Why? Did something happen?” Because, of course, we go to negative first, right?

Who did it? It was Dolly's kid, wasn't it? I've been watching that little boy. And she said, “Mommy, you're old, and you don't even know your colors. You've got to talk to Mrs. Carmen.” (Laughter) The Head Start teacher knew before I did that my child knew her colors. That's the kind of job you have. (Applause) So that said, let me tell you about these three centers. First, I went to my boss, and I begged, and I said, “Oh, please, please, please, let me give this a shot.” And she said, “We have no money. We work for women.”

I said, “But you've got to understand – if men are well-informed, they'll make better decisions.” “What is wrong with you?” she said, “But go ahead.” We got the money. Now we have to do something with it. So here is what we ended up doing. We went to the experts, and this time, it had nothing to do with us. However, we ended up with three sites. Anybody here from New Haven? Oh, that's too bad. Oh, there you are. I worked with a Head Start program, the New Haven Child Development. Wow.

Ms. Vanetta Lloyd – if you go back to New Haven and you know Ms. Lloyd, OK? – you want to clone this woman. She said to me, “Let me tell you something. If you're coming in here and you're going to talk to my parents about child support, you're going to do it after you train me, and after I know what's going on because I've been in this center for god knows how many...” I was scared. But guess what she was showing me? “You're just not coming in here and throwing money around, and thinking that we're going to be happy about this. You're going to do it our way.” Well, she was right.

She watched me all the time. OK? Ms. Lloyd runs this program like you've never seen. And what does she tell her guys all the time? It's like – I'm going to push the buttons here – “Did you have fun? Now let's talk about the responsibility.” This is how she opens her workshops. Everybody loves Ms. Lloyd. So, thank you for that opportunity. However, there is somebody here, Pat Doolan – where are you, stand up – executive director of Head Start in Litchfield. (Applause) Pat saved me and kept me out of a lot of trouble, because Pat said, “You know what? We have a Good Guy cassette.”

They had this all by themselves, before I even got to them. She said, “Guys are good. And they're not only the biological fathers. I have grandfathers, stepfathers, people from the neighborhood.” She was already doing fatherhood with no money. She was ahead of the ball game. So, if you have a chance, talk to Ms. Doolan. She really walked me through what I needed to do at Head Start. Thank you, Pat. (Applause) Then there was that school – Mary Hooker School – where there was this gentleman by the name of Omar Garcia.

And Omar said to me, “I want you to talk to my parents, but I want you to do it in Spanish.” Hey, no problem.” Porque yo hablo español, porque yo soy boricua. Everybody got that? (Applause) I'm very proud of my roots, and my name is Lydia Vélez Esteves Valentín, but that doesn't fit anywhere, so even the legal department allows me to keep that last one out of it. But let me tell you what my message is: it doesn't matter what you do, if you don't do it from here. I don't care what you're doing. (Applause)

Let me tell you about imperfection – how beautiful it is. We send these messages to fathers all the time about – and we do it to mothers, too – “This is how you have to be. This is the little box that you fit. Here are the rules. This is what a good parent is.” And then we wonder why they don't talk to us? “Can you do the best that you know how?” That's what I expect from my parents. “And then when you get stuck, let's talk.” Let's talk. Not make judgment, not fix it, sometimes – that's the tricky part, because you want to fix it, don't you? Yeah, I do, too.

My hero is my daughter. My best friend is my father. Let me tell you why. Unfortunately, today, I am losing the battle with my father to alcohol. My father didn't have any of the stuff that we're talking about. He didn't sit at the table and talk to me. It was like, “Mi hija, Dios te bendiga. God bless you. You know I love you, right?” His advice to me was, “Don't do three things, mia. You go to jail, you embarrass me, I kill you.” (Laughter)

“You disrespect your mother, I kill you.” (Laughter) And they were divorced. (Laughter and applause) “And you become an alcoholic, and we both die.” So he's aware. But whenever I want to feel just like Lydia, I run there – 36 years old – I still sit on his lap. (Laughter and applause) Here is what I promised you that I would share about my life. You still with me? [Audience: Yes!] OK, all right. Because I speak very fast, because I'm Puerto Rican, and you know how that happens all the time – we speak very, very fast. So I've had to learn, in my American ways...Am I doing a good job at that, no.

However, when my daughter... I divorced and my daughter was still to be born. Great guy, we didn't get along, we did it all right, got married, tada tada tada. We got divorced the right way, too. We had nothing – piece of cake. It was 90 days. We had nothing. We married poor, we divorced poor. We had no issues in court. In the beginning, when my child was born, he was there. He knew what to do, believe it or not. She was little. Then she turned nine, and he disappeared because she has a mouth. I wonder where she gets that.

And so she started asking questions, and the questions were deep and hard, and she wanted to know why other kids had these things and she didn't. And some of that had to do with daddy and being married, and he got scared. And he went away. So I would say, from one to nine, she wanted her dad. This is what I would think. Today, at fifteen – I tell you – she needs her dad. (Applause) At the age of twelve, I got a phone call from her school that said they were racing her to the hospital – running with her to the hospital – she was suicidal.

I have her permission to share this with you - in writing. Suicidal at twelve. This is my baby. Do you know how bad it feels not to be able to fix it? When I walked into the hospital – this is a community, people know me in the community – the first thing the doctor said to me is, “Where's her father?” And I said, “I don't know. This is the problem.” I still hadn't seen my daughter. So I go and I talk to my daughter, and now they have her in these pajamas – it's not my cool twelve-year-old: “Oh, Mommy!” – sitting in a little corner, saying, “I don't want to live.”

Hopeless, scared – not only my daughter, but myself. I knocked on my ex-husband's door, and I said, “Come on, mio. Let's go save your daughter.” And he said, “Why me?” because he was terrified and this is what we do – right? – when we're scared? And I said, “She wants you.” He walked in that room and it was like she saw – with all due respect – God. And they hugged and they cried. And then the next session, she yelled at him and called him all kinds of names. (Laughter) The therapy thing went bad. But my point was: I could not take her out of where she was.

He needed to. And he did, when I knocked on the door. Don't stop knocking on the door, OK? If you want fathers to come closer, ladies, we need to put our fist down a little bit. (Applause) Little bit. What this means is that in no shape or form I'm saying that women do not deserve all the props in the world, who are single mothers raising children. You did not hear that from me. What I'm saying is, we should not have to. What I'm saying is, gentlemen, you are equally important to the development of our children. Step up to the plate. We'll meet you halfway. (Applause)

Just halfway. You have something to offer your children, but only you know what that is. Yeah, the financial support is great, lalalalalalala, yeah – and I'm from child support, OK? But there's so much more you can offer your children. There's so much more that you have to give, even if it's a story about how bad you were when you were growing up, OK? It is your story. Share it with your child. (Applause) So let me just tell you this.

I am scared – terrified – that we're going to close the door on fathers who are halfway there, and that those of us who had to raise children on our own will let our pride get in in our way and harm our children. Yes, we have done it alone. Yes, we can do it alone. But can our children? I ask you one favor – because advocates, we always ask for favors – OK? I want you, before you leave today, to write the word “fatherhood” and under it, put “yes” or “no.” And before you leave your seat, leave it there for me. Tell me if it's going to be a “yes” or a “no.”

You don't have to make radical changes. Talk to the Feds, get your money, get the technical assistance that you need. Call me. I will talk to you about it. And I mean call me, OK? So you can feel free to do that. We'll do it in English. We'll do it in Spanish. Unfortunately, those are the two only languages that I could speak. However, remember, we don't have to be the same – we just have to have the same goal. (Applause) So, are we going home to do something more that what you already are doing, which I hear is wonderful work? (Applause)

How many of you do not have a fatherhood initiative in your program? I love honesty. This is the only group I can guarantee it will happen. You saw those hands? How many of you think that you can have a fatherhood initiative? Are you listening, Feds? You're listening? I can recognize them anywhere. Then challenge the folks who brought me here today by writing proposals from the heart. And if you need technical assistance, I'll be happy to give it to you. You don't have to pay me. (Applause) You have to get to me first, obviously.

If you want someone to talk to you about what you can do in your program, you've got to coach me about what works. And then I can give you ideas. It may take a phone conversation. It may take some traveling. It may take whatever you think it needs. You folks who I cannot see up there, may I see a show of hands? How many of you are going to have a fatherhood initiative program? Well, my daughter was right again. My name is Lydia Velez Esteves. I am the executive director of Sin Barreras, and what that means is, “without barriers.”

I challenge you today to recognize the barriers and help each other remove them. It's been my pleasure, my honor. God bless, good luck. (Applause)

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