



Becoming the North Carolina Fatherhood Initiative: A Work in Progress

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G. Stan Meloy, PhD, LPC

Introduction

Appreciating fathers – both in society and in the family – is a relatively new phenomenon, but one that has gained wide prominence and appreciation over the past ten years. With regard to how men parent, communicate, and solve problems, the North Carolina Fatherhood Initiative facilitates programs and interventions to support a variety of different father and adolescent populations. This non-profit organization provides divorce and reconciliation counseling, parent education, group support for non-custodial fathers, character development classes for high school males, substance abuse education, and support for teen fathers.

This article describes the evolving experiences of one program director responding to the call to establish a “fatherhood initiative” in Davidson County, North Carolina. The fatherhood initiative described herein is one of the numerous initiatives currently being implemented across the country to assist fathers and families. The author assumes a personal narrative writing style to relate those frustrations and joys, challenges and breakthroughs, and successes and failures that are likely to occur in other such enterprises.

Developing A Good Mission

In December 1999, I was hired as the first Executive Director of the ACT (All Children Together) Coalition – a small, rural, non-profit organization funded primarily by The Duke Endowment (TDE). One of my earliest priorities was to understand and advance the objectives that had been outlined in our grant proposal. Some had been clearly articulated, while others had been more vaguely defined. Those goals included: (1) Recruiting dads to volunteer at their kid’s day care centers: *Getting Men Involved Program*; (2) Rallying fathers within faith-based communities: *Tyro Church Program*; (3) Providing support and education for fathers who had children with special needs: *Arc Fathers*; and (4) Linking teen fathers

with adult mentors: *MATCH Program*. It didn’t take long, however, before we started to consider a more prominent and diverse role for the ACT Coalition.

It was at this point when I first started to appreciate the importance of having valid data describing different family populations. Developing goals and programs without an accurate sense of who needs help, why they’re having problems, and what’s already being done, can be presumptuous. According to the Davidson County Department of Social Services, there were significant needs within our county. For example, approximately 1,300 fathers weren’t paying their child support, 3,700 men were non-custodial fathers, 600 parents were incarcerated, 250 boys under eighteen had become fathers, 350 girls under eighteen had become mothers, and 35% of the County’s children were being raised in single-parent (fatherless) homes. After thoroughly assessing this needs-based data, we developed our first Mission Statement:

The ACT Coalition will understand and respond to the needs of fathers in Davidson County whether they’re custodial, absent, married, single, imprisoned, or adolescent; and, it will develop programs to provide support and encouragement for children without fathers or positive male role models.

In many ways, men need their children as much as their children need them. Indeed, children give their parents something more important and meaningful than themselves to work and sacrifice for, and those who connect with their kids experience significant and measurable benefits for themselves. With that premise in mind, we created and added two new programs to our original, four core programs: *The Phoenix Initiative* and *Weekend Heroes*.

The Phoenix Initiative

The majority of men not paying their child support in Davidson County are more “dead broke” than “dead beat,” and they risk being jailed over weekends until they’ve made some level of restitution. Dr. Randy Turner, Vice President, National Fatherhood Initiative, created a dynamic workshop

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Correspondence information can be found on page 43.

called *Foundations of Fatherhood*, and I borrowed liberally from his curriculum in creating *The Phoenix Initiative*. This eight-hour workshop promotes the advantages of fatherhood. My goal was to: (1) Meet individually with fathers to determine their needs, resources, and problems; (2) Strengthen father-child relationships; (3) Generate more appreciation for the child's mother; (4) Create a sentencing alternative to weekends in jail; (5) Enhance parenting skills; (6) Improve the welfare of children; and (7) Save taxpayer dollars. This model is interactive and emphasizes problem solving, decision-making, goal setting, and accountability.

After I developed my curriculum, I submitted a Request for Proposal to the Davidson County Job Training and Employment Center (JTEC) to fund *The Phoenix Initiative*. Our proposal was approved, and JTEC agreed to screen and refer men directly to our program. However, Welfare-to-Work restrictions precluded them from freely or easily recruiting enough fathers to keep this program going. For example, only twelve men were referred over three months, and only five completed the full eight-hour workshop. This represented less than 1% of all fathers in Davidson County who had been charged or convicted for not paying child support. Faced with the certainty that those numbers weren't going to improve until our recruitment problems were resolved, *The Phoenix Initiative* was suspended. In order to be more effective, we needed judges to sentence and refer fathers directly to our program, because without their cooperation, we had very little leverage or authority to intervene with this population.

In retrospect, I realize that we should have reached out to our judges with more intent, and not relied exclusively on JTEC for recruitment. We believe in the efficacy and logic of this workshop and think it deserves more consideration, scrutiny, and testing. Indeed, the few men who participated in *The Phoenix Initiative* all reported that it had been an extremely positive and worthwhile experience.

We plan to reintroduce *The Phoenix Initiative* with the support of our County judges as part of

our campaign to reform current child support policies that may hurt mothers and children more than fathers. Specifically, I'm referring to an amnesty plan to relieve fathers who have fallen hopelessly behind in their payments. Some judges support the concept of forgiving steep arrearages under strict guidelines so men can get caught up. Otherwise, they're inclined to disappear, never pay anything, and never see their kids. We think this idea has merit and believe more fathers will resume their child support payments and reconnect with their kids if given a second chance. It's a debatable and provocative issue, but other initiatives – like the Baltimore Program – have already demonstrated positive outcomes in this regard (Jones, 2002).

Weekend Heroes

With 3,700 non-custodial, "weekend," fathers in Davidson County, I established a support group called *Weekend Heroes*. Most men never get used to "losing" their kids, and the sadness, regret, and guilt associated with this loss can linger indefinitely – especially if gaining more visitation or custody in the future seems improbable. Not spending enough time with their children is a ubiquitous complaint among the men who participate in this program.

Weekend Heroes was created to: (1) Encourage friendships among divorced or divorcing fathers; (2) Address some of the stereotypes, problems, and concerns they deal with as single parents; (3) Help fathers stay close to their children – regardless of the barriers they face; (4) Develop better relationships with their former wives; (5) Discuss child-rearing and discipline from a non-custodial perspective; and (6) Talk about starting over, feeling discouraged, step-parenting, visitation, and child support.

Initial participation in *Weekend Heroes* had been slight and recruiting new fathers had been disappointing. Most men were more inclined to ask for advice over the phone than to attend meetings. In an effort to bolster participation, I went to the Davidson County Courthouse to review divorce and separation records. This is public information and I was able to

identify the names and mailing addresses of the men I wanted to reach – along with the names of their children and former wives, how long they had been married, who was seeking custody, who had filed for divorce, and so on. As such, I started sending very personal letters inviting fathers to join *Weekend Heroes*. In an effort to establish rapport, I even referred to their kids and former wives by name, but continued to get a very cool response. It finally occurred to me that my letters had been far too personal and familiar. It was “big brother-like” in scope and I kept relaxing and reworking the language until they started to respond more favorably. This is what finally started to work:

Dear Joe,

I'm a family counselor and the Director of the North Carolina Fatherhood Initiative in Thomasville. We're a non-profit group whose mission is to strengthen father/child relationships, promote the benefits of fatherhood, and encourage the potential and development of kids.

According to the public records at the Davidson County Courthouse, it appears that you and your wife may be divorcing. I'm just writing to introduce myself and to invite you to our next workshop for divorced and divorcing fathers – Weekend Heroes. We're a very informal group that meets once a month to talk about visitation, getting along with a former wife, parenting, child development, and other issues important to non-custodial fathers. If you'd like more information about us, or just want to talk with one of our counselors, please call me at 476-0888.

For your consideration, I've enclosed a copy of our Dad's Divorce Guide and a schedule of our meetings and parent education seminars. It would be a pleasure to meet you, Joe, and I hope you'll check us out. Take care and be well.

I've learned that a lot of men will pledge to attend a meeting over the phone – and sincerely mean it when they do – but will then not show up.

Recruitment has taken more effort and persistence than one might imagine, and most men need to be “courted” a few times – not just once – before they commit. Indeed, when a father tells me he's coming to a meeting, but then doesn't, I always follow up with a letter like this:

Dear Joe,

I was hoping to see you last night at our Weekend Heroes meeting. Ten of us met to talk about _____ and I'll bet you'd be a great addition to this small group. As single fathers, we're all in the same boat – more or less – and the guys had some interesting stories and questions. I hope you'll consider attending our next meeting on _____ and I'll send you a reminder before then. In the meantime, please feel free to call on me for any reason. Take care, Joe, and I'll stay in touch with you.

We also offer counseling aimed at marital reconciliation. Research suggests that kids have more opportunity for success when they're raised in two-parent families, and that too many couples bail out of their marriages prematurely. Helping preserve family relationships by discouraging divorce is one of our objectives – providing there are no issues of abuse or neglect. We understand that promoting marriage has become a controversial issue, but we think helping parents resolve their differences so they might choose marriage over divorce is a worthwhile pursuit (Levine, 2001).

Of course, too many parents continue to fight with each other after they divorce – especially over visitation. And that's a shame, because kids who witness ongoing conflicts between their parents can be psychologically and emotionally devastated. Indeed, when parents develop respectful and cooperative relationships, kids are relieved from choosing one parent over the other, deciding which parent to believe and trust, being loyal to one parent while disloyal to the other, and so on. Unfortunately, former couples can become so entangled in their own anger that they cannot effectively respond to the feelings of grief, confusion, and anxiety their

children may be going through. The inability of parents to negotiate more peaceful and cohesive post-divorce relationships may have more to do with not knowing how to "change the dance" than an unwillingness to try.

In an effort to distract parents from their own conflict, teach negotiation skills, and help them better understand and respect the needs of their children, we'll be introducing a three-hour workshop next year called *For the Sake of the Kids*. Borrowing heavily from the SMILES (Start Making It Livable For Everyone) program created at Michigan State University (Soderman, 1994), we hope judges in Davidson County will court order all parents to attend this program before granting a divorce.

We're also introducing another intervention -- *Homeward Bound* -- aimed at fathers in transition from prison back home to their wives and children. Men returning from prison are uniquely challenged to recover from their hardships on one hand, while resuming their roles as husbands and parents on the other. Their need to be anchored in a situation or environment that is more reliable and stable than themselves is crucial -- especially at the point of release and during early probation when adjustment is fragile and perplexing.

Fathers who enjoy acceptance and support from their families are much more inclined to find and keep jobs, cooperate with probation requirements, and avoid going back to prison than fathers who don't. They're simply more motivated because they have more to lose. Unfortunately, reintegration is rarely a smooth process because wives often, and rightly, harbor feelings of resentment, suspicion, mistrust, and entitlement, while husbands often fail to accept full responsibility, seek forgiveness, and make amends for their past "mistakes."

While cohesive and peaceful relationships encourage reintegration, antagonistic relationships fuel recidivism. Men who become discouraged by ongoing conflicts at home are more inclined to violate probation, make poor choices, and resume

risky behaviors. In essence, strong family relationships compel fathers to "walk the walk," and as such, wives and children often have more power to influence good behavior and discourage relapse than probation officers or judges.

As part of my dissertation, I created and tested a family therapy model covering eleven different domains: (1) Personality Issues, (2) Communication, (3) Conflict Resolution, (4) Financial Management, (5) Leisure Activities, (6) Sexual Relationships, (7) Children and Parenting, (8) Family and Friends, (9) Spiritual Beliefs, (10) Role Relationships, and (11) Closeness and Flexibility. My goal was to enhance problem-solving skills and restore rules, roles, and boundaries to couples dealing with reintegration. The research compared pre- and post-test differences between two groups of fathers in transition from prison back home. The comparison group received individual counseling without their wives and the experimental group received family counseling with their wives. The improved scores within the treatment group were quite remarkable and we hope to pilot a longitudinal study next year -- using this model -- to reduce recidivism rates in North Carolina by strengthening family relationships (Meloy, 1999).

Core ACT Programs

The following section provides a brief introduction to the ACT Coalition's core fatherhood programs.

Getting Men Involved Program

This program encourages fathers to volunteer at their child's day care center. We provide monthly dinners to recruit more men, plan work projects, share volunteer experiences, and talk about a variety of topics related to parenting, child development, and marriage.

Tyro Church Program

The goals for a faith-based initiative were never explicitly defined in our grant, and the role of churches remains unclear and untapped at this point.

Arc Fathers

The Arc, a non-profit organization, facilitates a

quarterly support group for fathers who have children with special needs.

MATCH Program

In partnership with the MATCH Program for teen mothers, this intervention was designed to encourage unmarried teen fathers to develop responsible and reliable relationships with their children. However, lack of interest and leverage forced us to suspend and reconsider this endeavor. A year later, Dr. Joe Hoedel, Associate Director, ACT Coalition, created a two-month curriculum called *Boys to Men*. And while the primary focus (bonding with the child) remained the same, he also made arrangements with the Job Training and Employment Center (JTEC) to provide free education (GED and/or an associate's degree from Davidson County Community College) and job training benefits if – and only if – teen fathers completed the *Boys to Men* program. This not only provided the hook we needed to recruit young, unmarried fathers, but it also was a sign of respect, satisfying their desire to become financially independent and goal-directed.

Surprisingly, the young men who have participated in this program have been more willing to ask questions and talk about their children than we would have predicted. It's important that intervention programs recognize the personal needs and concerns of the population they're trying to help and that they respond with meaningful incentives to increase participation and acceptance. Moreover, programs that are costly to administer (counseling services) or that offer generous incentives (free education and job training) should not be free. Expectations for repayment – either through mandatory participation or reimbursement – not only increases the value and significance of the intervention, but it also shows respect for the people who benefit from the program.

In June 2000, I attended the Third National Fatherhood Summit in Washington, D.C. Two weeks prior to that, I had sent a letter of introduction to Dr. Wade Horn, President, National Fatherhood

Initiative (NFI) – and now the Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Services – describing our programs and objectives. He urged me to think more globally, pursue larger objectives, and cultivate more partnerships with people who had similar goals. He also mentioned the possibility of the ACT Coalition becoming associated with the NFI.

By the end of the summer, we made that transition and changed our name to the ACT Fatherhood Initiative. I went out of my way to tell everyone – especially the media, funding sources, and community leaders – that we were the first organization in North Carolina to be associated with the NFI. It gave us a real boost in terms of legitimacy and recognition. Television, talk radio, and newspaper journalists have always been keenly interested in our efforts and kind and generous in their coverage. Indeed, courting favorable relationships with the media is immensely important and works to everyone's benefit.

Funding, Program Development, and Partnerships

It had been a full first year, but with only two years left on a three-year grant, I needed someone who could raise money, create programs, and provide counseling. Thankfully, TDE increased our 2001 budget and we hired a marriage and family therapist with grant writing experience. His name is Joseph M. Hoedel, PhD.

There really can be a struggle of priorities between writing grants and developing programs. Creating curricula and interventions may be more satisfying, but the reality and pressure of generating revenue is intense. The dilemma: without programs to market and promote, partnerships and funding can't be won. Without funding, there's no money to develop marketable programs.

For example, six months ago, we discovered that the Davidson County Partnership for Children – overseer of Smart Start funds – had terminated their parent education programs at Davidson County Community College because of cutbacks. To fill that void, we developed a series of topics we thought

most parents would find relevant and compelling:

- Traditional and Responsible Parenting
- Parents Are the Key Factor in Effective Discipline
- 10 Ways to Prepare Your Child to Begin Kindergarten
- Allies or Enemies? Helping Divorced Parents Find Peace
- First-Aid for First-Time Parents: Medical Advice & Guidance
- Talking About the Difficult Issues: Sex, Drugs, and Rap-N-Roll
- Why Moms and Dads Are So Important: Strengths & Differences
- Helping Your Child Succeed in School
- Regaining Control of Your Teen: The Atom Bomb Approach!
- Marital Enrichment: Making a Good Marriage Better.

Then, we invited college professors, physicians, principals, schoolteachers, clinicians, authors, and program directors to teach a monthly seminar related to one of our topics – and to their area of expertise.

This endeavor has been extremely successful, especially as a means of developing close relationships with other people and groups, promoting our mission, and recruiting fathers into our existing programs, namely *Weekend Heroes*. Moreover, we've reached out to the court system, and now, some of the parents who participate in our seminars have been court-ordered to attend. The response from our community has been overwhelmingly positive, and there's a good chance we'll eventually receive funding to keep it going.

If time and resources permit, funding may be acquired in a number of different and interesting ways. For example: (1) identify the unmet needs within an organization, (2) develop a proposal to meet or strengthen the goals within that system, and (3) introduce a pilot program (the *solution*) for a very small return. If the endeavor proves worthwhile during the trial period (3-9 months), then a

contract for services may be negotiated later on.

For example, Hoedel learned that some male students at Thomasville High School had been labeled at-risk because of truancy, delinquency, poverty, dropping out, and substance abuse. In response, he created a course for high school boys to increase graduation rates and reduce at-risk behaviors – *Character Development & Leadership*. His curriculum is aimed at mentoring, personal responsibility, decision-making, peer pressure, teamwork, diversity, and respect for females. Beyond that, he taught the class gratis. The first semester was a trial by fire, but he learned valuable lessons about what to include and what to eliminate. His persistence has paid off, and he's created a highly innovative and experiential course that may be generalized to other North Carolina school districts.

This class has also gained favor among community leaders and others interested in education reform. For example, Senator Cal Cunningham participated as a guest speaker, and the National Fatherhood Initiative published an article in *Fatherhood Today* commending Hoedel's students for their fund raising achievements related to the September 11th terrorist attacks (Sylvester & Degraffinreid, 2001).

Thomasville High School is currently reimbursing some of our expenses, and a new budget was approved so that Hoedel can train and supervise graduate students to support his efforts. He currently supervises two interns: one who conducts assessment and research, and one who conducts student and family counseling. Moreover, he's developed relationships with faculty members at UNC-Greensboro – most notably Dr. Kay Pasley – to help him assess student outcomes. Using reliable instruments to determine the validity of programs is not only important as a means of strengthening curricula, but it is also crucial in winning support from potential funders.

Partnerships have been key to our success. We have deliberately and energetically pursued rela-

tionships with people and organizations whom share our vision; have ideas, contacts, and resources that may enhance our mission; and/or whom may benefit from a partnership with our coalition. In fact, it's been one of the most important aspects of our sustainability and growth. It's gratifying that so many community and business leaders have encouraged and guided our efforts, and they appear to be genuinely interested in our success. Some of those organizations include: Baptist Children's Homes of North Carolina, Thomasville Furniture Industries, Inc., The Bob Timberlake Gallery, UNC-Greensboro, Foundation for the Carolinas, Carolina Envelope and Printing, Inc., Traditional Parent Magazine, The Dispatch, and WLXN News.

Reaching Higher

By the summer of 2001, we were halfway to our 2003 deadline with TDE, and we still hadn't secured a major grant to keep us going beyond that point. That's when Dr. Michael C. Blackwell, President, Baptist Children's Homes of North Carolina (BCH) stepped up. While BCH's mission and resources far exceeds our own in scope and depth, strong parallels exist, especially around interventions with at-risk youth. With the gloomy prospect of going broke in 18 months, I approached Dr. Blackwell for help. To my immense relief, he pledged a substantial contribution in fiscal year 2004 and directed some of his staff to help Hoedel research different grant opportunities. Beyond that, Dr. Blackwell's commitment helped inspire TDE to continue their financial support beyond 2003.

It's always been our desire to become a leading fatherhood program in North Carolina. To that end, and with the support of Senator Cal Cunningham and Governor Mike Easley, we recently changed our name from the ACT Fatherhood Initiative to the North Carolina Fatherhood Initiative (NCFI). As such, we have also reconsidered our objectives and created a new Mission Statement:

Our mission is to strengthen and preserve

family relationships, promote the benefits of fatherhood, encourage the development and potential of children, and advocate for laws and reforms that are pro-family.

Assessments: *Conduct continuous statewide assessments to determine how the needs of different family populations are being met or neglected.*

Leadership: *Assist other North Carolina fatherhood initiatives with program and curricula development, funding, recruitment, collaboration, research, and media relations.*

Best Practices: *Integrate information, objectives, and resources between different social support agencies (private/state/federal) in an effort to contain costs and reduce the duplication of services.*

Internships: *Recruit and supervise graduate students to participate in NCFI sponsored, clinical and research internships.*

Research: *Conduct research to determine the efficacy of existing interventions, publish program outcomes, develop partnerships, and secure funding.*

If we are to assume a greater leadership role, it's imperative that we have representation at the capitol in Raleigh -- especially if we expect to garner state-sponsored and/or court-ordered support for our programs related to child support, divorce, parent training, public education, and imprisonment.

From Local Effort to Statewide Initiative

In 1999, Governor Jim Hunt established the North Carolina Governor's Commission on Responsible Fatherhood. A diverse group of professionals worked for 18 months assessing problems and solutions associated with fatherless families before submitting their recommendations to the Governor. Some of these recommendations included:

- "The Governor and the General Assembly should create a permanent statutory agency on Responsible Fatherhood (similar in structure to the NC Council for Women) in response to

national and state recognition of issues surrounding 'fatherlessness.'

- The Governor should issue an executive order to all 100 counties in North Carolina instructing them to develop and implement a plan to support, nurture, and encourage responsible fathering/fatherhood in their communities.
- The Commission, or its designated agency, should create, update, and maintain a single-source, comprehensive, Internet accessible database of current and future, successful, private and public (including non-profit) fatherhood programs, services, and materials, both in North Carolina and across the nation.
- The Commission, or its designated agency, should research other state programs that address co-parenting issues inside and outside of marriage and implement suitable models in North Carolina.
- The Commission, or its designated agency, should identify and promote community-based marriage, education, and marriage mentoring programs for teens and adults.
- North Carolina's New Hire Program should be expanded to include all North Carolina employers, regardless of size, that pay a salary or issue a check for work compensation, in an effort to help enforce child support payments.
- The North Carolina Judiciary should be uniformly educated about, and effectively motivated to use, alternative sentencing methods, in lieu of jail time, when sentencing non-custodial fathers who fail to pay child support. The alternative sentencing methods would include, but are not limited to, educational and/or employment training programs and parenting skills classes.
- Mandatory mediation and educational programs for divorced and unwed parents should be established." (Stark, pgs. 6-8).

Having successfully completed its task, the Commission was disbanded in December 2000. Unfortunately, there's been no follow up – until

now. The NCFI seeks to resurrect and pursue the recommendations of the Governor's Commission. Currently, there are over 45 fatherhood groups in our state, but we're so detached from one another that we lack the influence and impact we might otherwise and collectively enjoy. As such, we're also determined to unite and strengthen North Carolina fatherhood initiatives by providing information, support, and training related to: (1) grant writing and fund raising, (2) advertising and promotion, (3) recruitment and referrals, (4) advocacy and political reform, (5) partnership building, (6) research and publication, (7) internships and staffing, and (8) program and curriculum development.

We propose to provide this technical assistance and support through: (1) Meeting with the individual directors of the forty-five fatherhood groups to learn more about their programs, needs, and priorities; (2) Creating an NCFI web site; (3) Sponsoring and facilitating a statewide fatherhood conference, *Strength in Numbers*, at UNC-Greensboro in January 2003; and (4) Introducing a massive PSA campaign created by the National Fatherhood Initiative.

Because of the generosity and financial backing of The Duke Endowment and Baptist Children's Homes, we have a chance to restore and elevate North Carolina's commitment and investment in fatherhood. Relying on the expertise and guidance of other fatherhood advocates in our state, and based on our own successes and failures in Davidson County, we are confident that we can advance this good effort.

Conclusion

The author's experiences continue to evolve as service delivery presents him and his colleagues with numerous learning opportunities. The ACT Coalition began simply enough when a group of concerned people in one rural county decided to address the needs of local fathers. The organization quickly emerged as a leading fatherhood advocate, and experimented with several different program

designs through trial and error. While some of these programs have succeeded, others have not. All in all, the North Carolina Fatherhood Initiative continues to refine its programs. Moreover, new challenges and opportunities lie on the horizon, including applying the lessons learned at the local level to a new statewide effort. For more information, please contact Dr. Meloy at smeloy@ncfatherhood.org or www.ncfatherhood.org.

Acknowledgments

Between 1997 and 1999, Mary Lou Dickey, Director, Baptist Children's Homes Day Care

Services, created the ACT Coalition, organized and chaired a board of directors, established goals for helping men become better fathers, and then won a three-year grant from The Duke Endowment to fund her vision. She is our "First Lady," the chairperson of our board, and a great source of determination, optimism, and humor. I'd also like to express my gratitude and thanks to Mr. Rhett Mabry, The Duke Endowment, Ms. Anita Floyd, University of South Carolina, and Mr. Mitch Braswell, Office of Economic Opportunity, for their commitment, guidance, and encouragement.

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