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Self-responsibility or support?

In combination, they change lives -- and made the difference for me

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Special to the Observer

I have a confession to make. I am responsible for where I find myself in life today.

Wouldn't it be refreshing to hear these words spoken by those who have been incarcerated, those who have dropped out of school, those who are homeless, those who are facing bankruptcy, those who are going through a tough divorce or marital situation, those who are facing ethics violations, those who are unhealthy due to choices they made, or those who are addicted to alcohol or other substances?

It's fairly easy to say "I am responsible for where I find myself in life today" if I have good health, a successful career and financial security.

Rough start to successful life

As a child of the mid 1960s and early '70s, I spent the first few years of my life in public housing, the son of a father and mother with an 8th grade education. My father drank incessantly and my mother ran around a lot. Both of them died when I was very young, and I spent the majority of my childhood living in orphanages and foster homes -- 16 different places, to be exact. I was adopted as a teenager and later worked my way through college and graduate school.

Today, I run a successful consulting firm, have profitable real estate investments, a thriving 20-year marriage, two healthy and well-adjusted children, an impeccable credit score, and am an active contributor both financially and socially to my community. I am spiritually grounded, self-confident and content.

I am responsible for where I find myself in life today. And ... Without the support and encouragement of other people, my life wouldn't look anything like it does today.

Could any of us be where we are today without the support of others? (I didn't say "handout" or "welfare" -- only "support.")

Those of us who worked hard to graduate from esteemed universities did not make it alone. Somewhere along the way we had guidance and direction from others.

Much of the time parents play this role. But in many cases, parents are deceased or not capable, so others step in.

Others helped me

Cheers to these "others": the social worker who held my hand and walked me through a park one day; Mrs. Ladisa, who shared her faith with me; the family who made me a part of their family as a teenager; and Mrs. Oneil, an algebra teacher who patiently walked me through factoring numerous times after school.

There was also Mrs. Sharpe, a foster parent who drilled me on multiplication tables every day when I was only 8; Coach Koty, my high school basketball coach, who believed a 5-foot-8, 125-pound sophomore could play varsity; and Mrs. Buddin, who believed I could be president of my senior class.

Later in life, Ms. Billman, my college freshman public-speaking professor, saw the value of me sharing my life with others.

Dr. Walters, my psychology professor, helped me discover a natural gift of understanding and working with people.

Mr. Underwood modeled community involvement and service to others.

There are many more, and they continue, even as I approach my 45th year.

Be tough and compassionate

I made my share of mistakes along the way. And I am fortunate that they were not life-damaging mistakes. I understand how people head down destructive paths. I am sure many of us made mistakes that could have cost us a great deal and we just got lucky.

Self-responsibility? Yes.

Support? Yes.

How about both?

As I wrote in my previous article, I invite you to extend support to a person in need.

Encourage them to be self-responsible, and hold them accountable. Be tough. Be ruthlessly compassionate and don't forget that you got where you are because of support. Offer that support.

The combination of the two -- self-responsibility and support -- can make a significant difference in a person's life, including your own. And maybe if we do this, we will create a community that works for everybody.

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