

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

FALK AUDITORIUM

THE POWER OF PARENT-CHILD BONDS IN THE CORRECTIONAL SYSTEM

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2024

UNCORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

WELCOME AND FRAMING REMARKS

ANDRE PERRY, Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Community Uplift, Brookings Metro,

PANEL DISCUSSION

ANNELIES GOGER, Fellow, Brookings Metro, Brookings

CLINIQUE CHAPMAN, Social Justice Consultant

CHAD MORRIS, Chief Executive Officer, Trinity Family Life Center

ANGELA PATTON, Co-Director of "Daughters" and CEO, Girls for Change

LEONARD SMITH, Father in the film

MUSTAFA WRIGHT, Father in the film

PERRY: Good afternoon. Afternoon, family. How's everyone? I'm Andre Perry, senior fellow and director of the Center for Community Uplift at Brookings. And welcome to this exclusive screening of the award-winning documentary "Daughters," a poignant film that follows the journey of four young girls as they prepare for a special daddy daughter dance with their incarcerated fathers. This touching story serves as a powerful message about forgiveness, the healing power of touch and the deep empathy, empathy that can flourish in the hearts of young girls missing their fathers. We at the Center for Community Uplift at Brookings are proud to host this event where our mission is to enhance economic security and overall well-being for individuals across racial and geographic lines. At CCU, we believe in the importance of recognizing the strengths and assets and within our communities rather than solely focusing on disparities. And I can't say this enough. Whenever you're talking about incarceration, it's always about what's wrong with people. We need to focus on what's going right in our communities and look at the strengths in those members of our communities. By fostering diversity and inclusion, we can create better outcomes for all. And events like this serve as a testament to the resilience and potential of every member of our society. This afternoon, screening will be preceded by an engaging Q&A session featuring Angela Patton, the CEO of Girls for Change, along with the cast members from the film and other special guests. We are honored to have Brookings Fellow Annelies Goger moderating the panel discussion, guiding us through the impactful themes of the film and encouraging an open dialogue about the experiences shared within it. After the screening, we will offer a few brief reflections before inviting those in the audience to attend a reception. So thank you for joining us this afternoon. Let's celebrate our strengths of our communities and the transformative power of connection as we dive into the inspiring world of "Daughters." Now, I will say when we start the panel, there may be one other member coming on a little bit late, so please excuse us for that small interruption. But at this time, I will pass the mic to Annelies, who will kick off our panel discussion. Annelies and the panelists, please join us to the stage and you can give them a round of applause. Yes.

GOGER: Hello, everybody. It's, it's a pleasure to be here. And it really reminds me, I love in some ways that you're all closer to the front. In 2022, I gave a Ted Talk for TEDx San Quentin. It was a middle of the pandemic, and so it was really only just a tight knit group of people all day long listening to one story after the other. And I can tell you by the end of the day, we create, we really connected with each other. And it was one of the most memorable days of my life. And it was a tiny group like this that felt like a community and a family by the end of the day. So I hope that we can bring that spirit here, too, to this discussion. And I want to thank all the panelists here. You're about to see a tearjerker, so you have some tissues on your chair. And for those of you welcome who are joining us online, you can, you can screen the film along with us on Netflix.

The film "Daughters" is currently streaming. So, you know, I wanted to say a few remarks just to kind of show how big this whole context is. The U.S. incarcerates three and 3.7 times the average of our peer countries of industrialized countries. And that means that over 70 million Americans have a conviction record. And this has so many costs on not just individuals, but families, communities and even our national economy as we have talent that is held up and held back from having it's reaching its full potential. And so, you know, as we think about this broader context, one of the things that we struggle with most here because of a longstanding focus on punishment alone, is that we have two thirds of people who are rearrested within three. Three years. And so this has giant costs over \$80 billion a year in maintaining the facilities alone. That's not to mention those opportunity costs of people not working and not supporting their families and communities. And the problem also is that the solutions are hard to scale. So as we start to shift away from just focusing on punishment, we think about how do we reduce recidivism? How do we help support reentry and people reintegrating with their families and communities. It turns out that there's a lot of things that need to change that many different levels. So you have more than 80%, 87% of prisoners are in state facilities. So that's 50 different state policies that need to change. Not to mention all the local facilities and the federal ones. And so where I think this film really will have the most impact is really in changing people's hearts and minds at all levels. And and I really think you're going to see that in real life today. And so the final thing I want to talk about is kind of in the in the description, it says 1.4 million children have parents who are incarcerated. And so one of the most powerful things for successful reintegration that we have learned from the evidence is that the more someone is connected to their family and they have support in finding a job, getting a place to live, having transportation, the stronger those connections are, the better the outcomes are. And so that's why I love this panel today, because we're going to really take a deep, deep dive here into that topic. And so I want to introduce the panel here. At the end, we have Chad Morris, who is the CEO of Trinity Family Life Center. Welcome, Chad. You'll see him in the film as the the coach. Leonard Smith, welcome. Leonard is one of the fathers in the film. And Mustafa will also be joining us a little bit late today. He actually, they both, had to work and come off, get off of work today to join us. So we're really honored to have you here. Angela Patton is the CEO of Girls For a Change, but also the co-director of this film. And it was her TEDx talk that kind of spurred this, which you can also see online. And Clinique Chapman next to me is a social justice consultant and Howard professor. So let's get started. So, Angela, this film, it focuses in on the father daughter relationship and really focuses on like how you are going to use that connection to help people heal. I would love to hear your thoughts on why you chose that to highlight and what you're trying to communicate about fatherhood and daughter hood.

PATTON: Yes, greetings, everyone. Thank you for having me. I would like to say that this film pretty much told us what it needs. What I learned about making a doc is you may go in one way, right? And thinking, this is the story we should tell. And then we discovered these bonds that the girls wanted to make with their fathers during their incarceration. That was very similar to what the fathers wanted. The reason that I end up doing the film is because it actually comes from the ideas of young girls who are impacted by the criminal justice system and how it has ripped their families apart. And these resilient young girls actually were the ones who advocated for this particular program that you would see in the film. And so at first, we actually were like, which is going to film the program. But what we discovered was a very consistent theme, and that was the harmful practices of visitation and how these young girls yearn to touch their fathers. And so we realized that as we were telling this come into age story, as the girls were growing and learning and developing while their fathers were incarcerated, is that it was something around the criminal justice system that we definitely had to spotlight. And that was just a hug, a touch longer time on the phone. And so you would be able to see the complex, the complexities of this hurt and pain through trying to keep this connection. Thank you.

GOGER: And Clinique, you are going to be in the film as a social worker. I was wondering if you could share with the audience a little bit more about more broadly what you see as impactful for strengthening those family bonds. Yes, definitely. And so thank you all for having us. I think it's you know, the family bonds are critical, whether it's daddies, daughters, sons, just those family connections. So I think sometimes when we think about someone being incarcerated, we think about it as an individual. But that's not the only person that's impacted. There are whole communities that they're being retracted from. They're being removed from their communities. They're being removed from their family systems. You mentioned the economic cost, right? And so the impact on the daughters is great. And so when a father is not at home contributing to the financial stability, then you start to, you know, think about, you know, food instability and housing insecurity. And so all of those things are impacted just by one individual being incarcerated. And so I think when we start to think about, you know, air and water and the things that are necessary for us to survive, that connection is also required, too. And so we have to really think about the long lasting impact. And four generations from one person being incarcerated, even for I think there was a study recently, just one day of jail and just being inside, just being having shackles on your on your wrists for one day has an impact on you and your family. And so I think we have to really think about that and who we are impacting. It's a community that folks are a part of. And if we think about them as community members, right. You know, Leonard is a part of a community, was a part of community before and after. And so what happens to, you know, that

community when it's impacted by one person being removed times that by how many people are actually removed out of the community. And so I think those bonds are very essential. And, you know, we have to see them as not privileges. Right. It's not a privilege to touch and hug and to love you, to be around your loved one. But it's something that they require as part of their dignity. And so I think that's the perspective that we all need to really view those connections from.

GOGER: Yeah. And I think that you'll see in the film that it is told from from that perspective. And I think that's a huge contribution to this, to the discourse. Leonard, I wonder if you could share what it was like for you to try to communicate with your family when you were incarcerated. And and now we actually have Mustafa on the stage. Welcome, thank you for joining us. As I was saying earlier, they came out of work today to be here. And we're really honored to have you on the stage with us. And I was just turning to Leonard to ask him about what his experience was trying to communicate with his family while he was incarcerated. What was the process like and how did that impact you?

SMITH: Well, it was, it was -- Hello, everybody. Thank you for having us, once again -- It was, it was hard. It was difficult, because you was not really there with your children or your daughters, physically, to really know what's going on and you never really had a chance to really get a clear understanding. So it was a difficult time. I dealt with a lot of difficult times, but I mean, that's just a part of it. It was just tough for me.

GOGER: Mustafa, if -- I know you're doing this right away, but did you have anything to add about, you know, what what were you allowed to do to, to get in touch with your family and what were you not allowed to do and how that felt?

WRIGHT: We actually had multiple different forms of visitation like face to face on the glass, on the screen monitors. So depending on which kind, it affected you differently, you know, so because you really didn't have enough time to say what you really need to say to your loved ones. So it really made me more intentional what I need to say, you know, moving forward.

GOGER: Yeah. And Chad, you worked as the coach in the film and I would love to hear a little bit more because the film touches on this idea of human touch being very important and human connection. I was wondering if you could talk about how that filtered into your approach to coaching, and we had some

questions from the audience about how was, how did you develop this curricula to coach the fathers? So, I was wondering if you could speak about that.

MORRIS: Okay. Hi, everybody. When it comes to approaching this work with dads, I approach it from the place as a son and a father myself. I'm a girl dad, too. And so in dealing with these men, especially in the incarceration setting, it's really intentional to approach them from a place of authenticity, to embrace their authenticity. Very often when we deal with incarceration and we view incarceration, whether you're working in the environment or you just have a lens of it from the outside, what you know about it, there's an interpretation through the stereotype of that jumpsuit, through the inmate number, through the conviction that they carry, through where they may be from, through their outward appearance, who you may see them grouped together when they're traveling, if you see them moving in and out of court, if you see them in the community, being transported, they're, very often how we perceive them is through this stereotypical lens for the average person or the filter of their own experiences. But what we don't do is we don't think about the fact that that's somebody's son, somebody's uncle, somebody's brother, somebody's father. So these men in particular, what we had in common was being men and being fathers. So embracing them from the place that, hey, before you carry this particular conviction, your child only knows you're his daddy. And so being a part of the same alumni team I'm a part of, as a dad, we're going to start from that place, that brave space of being able to embrace the concept of reminding ourselves of who we are. I'm a big believer in the concept, and I try to share this with men when I have opportunities to grow with them, that you are who you're waiting for to show up for you, and your family is waiting for you to show up for you so you can show up for them. And in doing that, it's a necessary reminder to go back to that innate definition of who you are before you carried this conviction, before you're going through this trial, or you're dealing with the consequences of decisionmaking and the consequences that befall you in the criminal justice system, which may or may not be equitable. What is equitable is your relationship with your family and the fact that you're still a parent and a father, regardless of whether you're going to be in extended incarceration or whether this is a short journey for you or whether you don't know what's going to happen, it's incumbent upon you to make that effort as best you can, because very often in the incarceration setting, the identity of fatherhood is one of the things that could be put down while these other identities are embraced and picked up just to get through the sentence or what causes comfort. There's a concept of just understanding how to embrace the pain. So the curriculum utilizes an evidence based curriculum, but we were very intentional about making sure we adapted components to make sure it's culturally relevant for the men we're dealing with. Angela helped greatly when making sure it was curated the right way, knowing how it fit into the mission, that, Girls For

Change's mission is very specific, is to prepare black girls for the world and the world for black girls. And while we're dealing with these fathers, the fathers are part of that cheering team and that Team Child that needs to motivate that child and be as supportive as they can, and these girls want to embrace them. So we use a NPCL curriculum by Dr. Jeffrey Johnson, but we also adapted modalities that fit particularly what we were going to do but use pre- and post-testing and things like that and things of that nature to make sure it was properly informed, so when we put these other components in place, we knew that we were finding evidence of promise along the way. To make sure we were not just checking boxes, but having well-informed decisions to help these men come full circle back to their why.

GOGER: Thank you. And so a lot of work went into that development of that curricula. And also, I think a lot of work went into the development of the film, which took place over eight years. And Angela, so I wanted to ask you a question about, you know, during that eight-year process, you went into the facility. I mean, you see all the footage in the film. It's not easy to get in there and to do the things that you did. And also, you created this space with the fathers where they could share things that, you know, would be very personal and very, make them very vulnerable. So I was wonder if you could explain to the audience how you, like what was the work that that entailed? How did you get to that place where you could create a space of trust and people felt comfortable?

PATTON: Yeah, it's a twofold question, I believe. So I want to share that it was an eight-year process in making the film. But this is not the first Date With Dad program that Girls for a Change has facilitated. Actually, we probably had already facilitated about 13 in the Richmond metropolitan area. So I believe that one, the TEDTalk right, allowed people to be interested in replicating the model. And then I would say the sheriff who gave the girls permission to do the very first dance had built a relationship with myself and Chad over the course of some years and was always open and available to just share the success. Right. And so when we did make our way to Washington, D.C., it was because Clinique as well saw the TedTalk, right. And because of her tenacity and also understanding that this was going to be some positive outcomes in the D.C. area for the families and understanding what was happening in Richmond, I think that made it an easy sale. Right. But when you still take a program and then bring cameras to it, right, that's when you flip the script a little bit. Because Chad has been facilitating a lot of the fatherhood programs in Richmond, in the community and inside of our jails, however, cameras have never been in there. So how do we develop comfort, I believe is, first ,you just heard Chad: he can relate to the fathers. You know, that was one thing that they had in common. I also believe allowing me to come in and also tell my, you know, story as a young black girl who

now was a woman and had these amazing experiences with my father, resonated with the fathers that were there, and it made them want to do better and show up. And we are very consistent. And what we did with our cinematographer is made sure that the fathers were comfortable with him being there, and they also had the opportunity to affirm their voices if they wanted the cameras off. Right, the fathers had a choice in this. If you did not feel comfortable with the camera on, we would turn it off. If you don't want something shown in the film, we will not show that. And that doesn't usually happen in docs, right? Soon as you sign a release form, it's mine. And that's not the way that we wanted to show care. We really cared about what was important to them. And then lastly, our cinematographer's mother was incarcerated. And for me, I felt like Cambio understood exactly what these fathers may have gone through and really was intentional about how he approached where the camera would even be placed. And I think that some of the fathers forgot a camera was there sometimes because of his sensitivity. And so I think together with all of the "Daughters" team and how we partnered with the Washington, D.C. jail, we definitely made sure that we humanized everyone, including ourselves, right, in this position. Because it could be hard. I'm going to be honest with you. I don't like going to a jail, seeing all those brothers there. You know, I didn't have a brother there that's my blood. But I had a brother there that still feels like family. I understand what that does to me, that's not exciting for me. So I also have to breathe through this, right? Understand this and fight through, but understand, at the end, I'm trying to make sure that this film can bring not a jail story that you continue to see every day, but the love story. And that's how we approached it.

GOGER: Thank you. I love that that phrase. I think that's a very accurate depiction of the film. Mustafa, do you have anything that you'd like to say about what your experience of going through creative programs like this was like?

WRIGHT: I know for one, brother Chad really made us, like she said, made us very comfortable for us to be vulnerable in a space where we was at, that's not a reality for real, you know? So we're not speaking on like our problems, our emotions. And brother Chad really made it just so everybody was transparent. There was never any tension, no debates, you know what I'm saying? Everything was just so fluid and smooth. And I can say every week we look forward to going to classes, you know what I'm saying? Every week, it was just an outlet. And initially, to be honest, I only signed up because I thought I could get extra phone calls, talk to my daughter. But after that first class, I knew that there that this was something different, because D.C. jail don't provide programs or something especially of this magnitude right here. This was cool.

GOGER: Thank you. Leonard, what about you? What was it like to go through these kinds of programs?

SMITH: And just that just made me smile because it was it was everything. It was, it was the empowerment of it. Men coming together. Men talking about some issues pertaining to maybe raising their children, wherever they're going, in the right direction. We were learning each other at the same time, learning how to deal with our emotions in a way that we can capitalize off of. Chad definitely made it feel comfortable. I met Mustafa there; I didn't know him before that, but everybody in there were cool. We, we were all close. It was a brotherhood. It was a bonding, a bond of making and going into a new direction. So I just loved it because it's just, just like right now I'm just smiling, just thinking about it. The one thing Chad said, I'm not a teacher, you know, that, and it was, once he said that, it just leveled everything out and it was like, alright, well, cool, let's get to it. Let's get to whatever I need to learn, whatever you can help me learn, [inaudible], this is what we're doing. So it was, it was a beautiful thing.

GOGER: Thank you. So when we had lunch earlier, we were talking about how a lot of times, people see the film and the first thing they say was, well, what can I do about this? So I wanted to ask you all, if you were sitting in front of a member of Congress or the president today, what would you say that needs to change to make these connections with family stronger? I'll start with you, Clinique.

CHAPMAN: Sure. So in terms of the first initial thought, for me, it's like, well, let's start with why and how we got here, right? Like, let's really have hard conversation about how we got here and where we're going and not using punishment and prison as the solutions to the root causes of how we got here. So that's the first thing. And I think really framing it from that perspective, you see everything else as dignity. So how do we codify dignity? How do we make into law dignity, right? And so dignity principles, you know, I coauthored a set of dignity principles for those in conditions of confinement. What does that look like to actually make those across the board? We have the Pell, right. How do we bring Pell in and similar things like that to the local level as well? And so visitation should not just be about hugging your loved one once a month. How do we partner with families and bring them inside? And so I think we really need to take a step back and think about, you know, who we want to be inside, what the community members we want to have return to us and really start to put laws to practice.

GOGER: And for those who don't know, Pell is the Pell Grants are for education that were authorized to be used within incarcerated people, for people who are incarcerated. Yeah. Leonard, do you have anything --

just if you're sitting in front of Congress, everyone's like, Well, what should I do? What can be done? What would you say? What kinds of changes need to happen?

SMITH: From my standpoint, a lot of more togetherness, paint a clear picture to understanding. Because there's a lot of people in my age group or younger that don't even really know what's going on out here. And really what to look forward to. So we want a clear understanding. And before I pass the mic, I'm almost done, it's, it's it's troubling my heart now, what we're going through now. And no policymakers have even come to the rescue. No, no council members. We haven't even heard from the mayor, of a young guy who was doing the same type of work that I do, was shot 11 times by a police officer sitting in a McDonald's. So it has used, in a way, straddling the fence, but I know if I fall off that fence this way, I go back to where I don't want to be and I need to stay here and continue to grow and change for my children. But, it's been days now, they just buried the guy yesterday. The mayor still hasn't said nothing, no council member has said nothing. And if you're looking at what's going on in the community now, the, the younger generation, the younger people are, everybody's saying this generation is so lost, they're so lost -- how can you help us find ourselves? Nobody is saying anything to us. We're crying for help. We're murdering each other, crying for help, and nobody is saying anything. And then when the police murder one of us, still, nobody is saying anything. Or, excuse me. You are saying something when we murder each other: They belong in jail, they're this, they're that. But when a police officer murders one of us, you're not saying anything. So I think it needs to be close cut. And then we need to talk. We need to sit and have a forum because there are people protesting. I was one of them, peacefully. And I'm going to protest again after this, peacefully because we want to be heard. And maybe if we get some understanding, things'll cool down in the city. That's what I would like to bring.

GOGER: Thank you.

PATTON: Thank you for that. And so that just leads me and to invite young people to the table.

SMITH: Yes, ma'am.

PATTON: You are here today because I invited young people to the table, but I also accepted the invitation. And then understand your assignment. Well, well. Amen, the church say. And so I say that because I am one of the privileged ones who get to do that every day. And the reason "Daughters" exists is because I asked a question. What is the gap that you face? And the young Black girl said, my father. My Black father. The

narrative that has been painted around him; the things that people told me to believe about him. But then my experiences are really different. And then I'm confused. So I need to have a relationship that I defined for myself. And I said, Well, what does that look like? And that's when the girl said, that we want to be able to have a connection with him on our own terms, and was able to ask for something, and adults listened. And then they showed up, and they followed the directions. And now we are here with this film that is more than a film that's on Netflix. It is a tool for you to use and it's an opportunity to move to action. But please include the young people as we move forward.

MORRIS: Angela and Leonard stole my answers. As they so eloquently put it, I think what I would want to share with those who make policy is that we know, I'm wise enough to know that statistics inform policy and popular interest and loud interest and pipelined interest informs policy. But the heartbeat of what informs statistics in the public issues are the happenings of what goes on with the people. And if you have unamplified voices, silenced voices, ignored voices, two of the largest populations of people who are very underheard are incarcerated people and parents, and young Black girls. And so if you can find a way to listen to their stories, to not stand in a position of patriarchy to make decisions for people, but you can actually inform these things by the stories of the people, that's the closest thing I can see to a heartbeat to create these living issues and to make some of these policies and laws living things so that these documents are actually able to be embraced and that these laws are able to be worked to not just check a box, but to actually be reflected upon the people who are in the most need.

GOGER: Thank you. And Mustafa why don't you close us out. What would you like people to walk away with from this film?

WRIGHT: Well, just basically, we just, we need more programs like this. We need more people like sister Angela, brother Chad, sister Clinique. We need more because, because the work starts with us. Basically, so many words. Like we can say everything under the sun, but we have to put the work in for, for for us to see some type of traction going. So that's, that's, that's all I want closing, we just need more programs like this.

GOGER: Thank you so much. And so I know we're a couple of minutes over, but so I want to really extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who joined us today. And I really enjoyed this conversation. I feel like we could have talked for another hour easily, but I want to allow you all to experience this film. And also those of

you online can tune in to Netflix to watch it, and then we will regroup afterwards to reflect and then have a reception. So thank you so much.

CHAPMAN: Thank you.