

Minnesota's 2010 Excellence in Fatherhood Award Winners



The following awards were presented on Thursday, January 14, 2010, at the Strong Foundations Conference and Minnesota Fatherhood Summit at the Arrowwood Resort in Alexandria, Minnesota. Over 400 family professionals, educators, policymakers, and fatherhood advocates attended the three-day conference.

The first Excellence in Fatherhood award of 2010 was presented to the **Individual of the Year: Dr. Gar E. Kellom**. Gar has served in higher education for four decades. In 1992, Gar joined St. John's University in Collegeville and began articulating what it means for the university to be one of the four all-male institutions of higher education in the country. Gar is currently the Director of the Men's Center for Leadership and Service at St. John's University. The Center for Men's Leadership and Service seeks to create a safe and respectful environment for students to share their stories and discern who they are. Saint John's was the first liberal arts college campus to establish a men's center in 2001. The Center for Men's Leadership and Service hosts the annual conference on the college male and invites scholars from around the nation to encourage dialogue on difficult issues involving masculinity, men's role in society, volunteerism, patriarchy, and the important role of gender in society. The Men's Center also runs student-volunteer programs in local schools, and offers international service and study trips to Trinidad/Tobago and India/Nepal. Most recently, the SJU Men's Center hosted the first international conference for campus-based men's gender equality and anti-violence groups. Under Gar's leadership, the Men's Center seeks to work for justice and to better the lives of men and women through innovative programs, scholarship and community service. Gar is a pioneer, nudging us toward healthier notions of manhood and masculinity. Over the years, he has led men's discussion groups, retreats, and service trips around the US and internationally. He has helped launch national discussions about men's spirituality, health, and community service. He has promoted anti-sexism and anti-violence as a founder of the National Organization of Men Against Sexism. Gar has served on the board of directors of the Minnesota Fathers & Families Network (MFFN) since 2005. During his tenure on the board, he has been a strong advocate for his colleagues – men and women -- to embrace healthy masculinity. He promotes an understanding that masculinity can be humble, generous, and caring.

The second 2010 Excellence in Fatherhood award was presented to the **Program of the Year: the FATHER Project, a program of Goodwill/Easter Seals Minnesota**. A highly innovative program formed in Minneapolis in 1999, the FATHER Project offers services for low-income dads to help them support their children financially, emotionally and physically. The FATHER Project addresses some of the most intransigent problems facing low-income fathers such as high rates of incarceration, domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, low rates of employment, and intergenerational poverty. Program staff believes that the positive involvement of both parents is important to the healthy development of children and increases their chances of growing into mature adults. Through individualized case management, the program offers holistic services in fatherhood skills development, employment and training, child support services, family law, and GED completion. Staff served 380 fathers in 2009 with 229 of those representing new starts who completed the comprehensive enrollment process. The FATHER Project does not exist in a vacuum – its longevity is due in great part to the dedication of staff, especially the vision of Andrew Freeberg who guided the program through some of its toughest transitions. Additionally, the program has been nurtured through the passion of Guy Bowling, the dedication of Michelle Bell, and the hard work of dozens of staff and hundreds of volunteers. Beyond the invaluable institutional support of Goodwill Easter Seals Minnesota, the FATHER Project maintains a vast list of collaborative partners who extend the program into the community and extend its services into all areas of life. Through these partnerships, the FATHER Project offers culturally-competent services to families in the African American, Latino, and Native American communities. The FATHER Project brings together some of the best services, partners and staff to create an exceptional experience for the fathers and families who enter its doors.

The final award of the evening was presented to the 2010 Excellence in Fatherhood **Policymaker of the Year: Mark J. Ponsolle**, the Director of the Human Services Division in the Office of the Ramsey County Attorney. Mark currently oversees the divisions of child support, civil commitments, and child protection, having served as the Director of the Child Support Enforcement Section since 1998. Mark's work motto, "feed the babies", reflects his belief that human services must focus on the wellbeing of our youngest citizens. We often think of "policymakers" as those elected officials in state, city or county government. But some of the biggest impacts on fathers and families come from policymakers like Mark, who implement on the ground. Mark closely monitors county demographics and case data trends in order to find ways to engage fathers and improve processes for families throughout the child support process. Through his personal commitment to innovative policies, pilot programs, and a desire to make government work well, Mark sets a high standard for other Minnesota counties to follow. In the true spirit of innovation, Mark has sometimes taken controversial stands; for example he led Ramsey County to implement Minnesota's first projects in areas of genetic testing and child support arrears management. Ramsey County's Genetic Testing Policy ensures that the biological father is correctly identified in all the paternity cases initiated by Ramsey County by requiring genetic testing in those cases. Since the inception of this policy in 2004, over 4,600 fathers have been correctly identified and over 1,200 possible fathers correctly excluded. In addition to his county duties, he works on legislative and policy issues with state legislators, county commissioners, the Minnesota Department of Human Services, the Minnesota Supreme Court, and with the Minnesota Fathers & Families Network. Mark is a mentor to attorneys in his office and other County Attorney Offices. He speaks at the state and national levels relating to child support and paternity, and works tirelessly to get information to service providers, attorneys, the courts, and the public about child support and paternity establishment. Anyone who knows Mark feels his deep passion about these issues. As his nominators state, "Mark is about doing the right thing for the families we serve."

The **Excellence in Fatherhood Awards** have been presented by the Minnesota Fathers & Families Network since January 2005. The awards were created to honor individuals, agencies, policy makers, programs and other institutions that are making outstanding contributions to fatherhood policy and practice in Minnesota. The awards are presented annually at an awards ceremony at the Minnesota Fatherhood Summit, the statewide conference of the Minnesota Fathers & Families Network. In 2010, the Minnesota Fatherhood Summit was hosted in combination with the Strong Foundations Conference, the state's birth-to-three conference. A list of two-dozen past Excellence in Fatherhood awardees is available at www.mnfathers.org/awards.html.

The **Minnesota Fathers & Families Network**, a statewide intermediary nonprofit agency, is leading Minnesota's campaign for healthy fatherhood. MFFN enhances healthy father-child relationships by promoting initiatives that inform public policy and further develop the field of fatherhood practitioners statewide. Learn more online at www.mnfathers.org.