

The Gazette

Bethesda man helps men improve their 'daddyng' skills

by Ellyn Pak

Staff Writer

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If vehicle tags are indicative of its owner's mantra, a plate reading "DADDYNG" best sums up Allan Shedlin Jr. of Bethesda.

His office is bedecked with vintage thingamabobs: a chalkboard and mini-wagon with "Dad's Old Fashioned Root Beer" slogans, a vintage poster reading "At his best Daddy: Jackie Coogan," and photos of his family.

The 62-year-old daddy of three grown daughters and granddaddy of four asserts a difference between what he says is the one-time biological act of "fathering" and an ongoing process of male parenting coined "daddyng."

Shedlin, an educator and consultant, on Father's Day launched Dads Unlimited, a local organization that helps fathers learn the ins-and-outs of "daddyng," become the dads they want to be, and be a source to his child's physical, emotional, social, intellectual and moral well-being.

"There are facilities and resources for moms and not for dads," said Shedlin, who said though there seems to be a "fatherhood movement," the role of the father is sharply contrasted to the "motherhood and apple pie" image.

He addresses a broad range of issues, from the mundane act of changing diapers to dealing with an elder that spoils his or her grandchild with one-too-many sweets.

"It gives men permission to get in touch with their softer sides," he said.

Shedlin said he has met with a range of men including teen gang members, stay-at-home dads, divorcees, and AWOL (absent without leaving) fathers, but "daddyng doesn't occur in a vacuum."

He offers advice to women and grandparents, who also play key roles in their children's lives and the way men interact with their families.

He said he interviewed a woman in her ninth month of pregnancy, who doubted her husband's future abilities to change their child's diapers. "Can you imagine what it's going to be like to change his first Pampers?" Shedlin recalls asking the woman.

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"It's going to be a disaster," she replied. She added that in moments of sleep-deprivation and frustration, she might roll her eyes and scold her husband about not changing the diaper correctly.

Shedlin said he advised the woman to rethink those responses to prevent her husband from being discouraged, giving up, and making her change all of the baby's diapers.

He is working on a book, "Lifelong Daddying: What It Takes to Be the Dad You Want to Be," and has interviewed kids, dads and granddads of different ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses.

The interviews included Lafe Soloman of Bethesda, a lawyer, father of two, and co-president of Walt Whitman High School's PTSA.

Soloman said Shedlin asked about his experiences as a father, including the positives and negatives, and the values that were important to him.

"I think Allan has a very good service," Soloman said. "I think that a lot of people in our generation did not have fathers that were involved in their day-to-day lives."

Soloman, the father of a 21-year-old daughter and 17-year-old son, said he is the second male to be president of the high school's PTSA, next to the man who founded the organization 30 years ago. He said 20 percent of the PTSA is comprised of men.

"I've always believed in both volunteering and the importance of education and staying involved," he said. Soloman said he was often the only man who volunteered in his children's nursery and elementary school PTAs.

He also said there are misconceptions to what roles a father should play in his adolescent child's life.

"I think that if you ask your teenage child if they want you to be involved, they would uniformly say no," he said. "If you've always been involved and the child knows that you're going to be involved, secretly, they like that."

Shedlin said he hopes to provide pro bono services and donate proceeds from his consulting to grassroots organizations such as the Washington, D.C.-based Covenant House, which provides services and shelter to homeless and runaway youth. He said he hopes to extend his services to sports rookies dealing with fatherhood, fame and a famous career, and men in prisons and the military.

A native of New York City, Shedlin earned a bachelor's degree from Colgate University, and a master's degree in special and elementary education from Columbia University. He also studied educational administration at Fordham University.

He founded and served as executive director of the New York-based National Elementary School Center from 1985-1994. He also conducted senior staff briefings and served as a consultant to the U.S. Department of Education, Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of the Surgeon General.

Prior to his work at the center, Shedlin was the principal of Ethical Culture School in New York City. He has also taught nursery school through graduate school students. He moved to Maryland seven years ago.

Though Shedlin has met with thousands of fathers and children, he recalls the impact his own father made on his life. Shedlin said that his father, who was a traveling businessman, was unable to attend his young son's sporting events.

To his pleasant surprise, his father showed up two years ago to watch his son row on the Potomac River, a sport he picked up to commemorate his 60th birthday. Though his father showed up "a half century late," Shedlin recalls that it is never too late for a dad to support his child. His father died at the age of 87.

"I was shocked at the importance it still held for me," Shedlin said. "I really didn't expect 50 years later to care."

For information about Dads Unlimited, visit www.daddy.com.