

A Space for the Whole Family

Jeremiah Program's 25th anniversary



Michael O'Connell and Sue Hayes with Chastity Lord (left), CEO of Jeremiah Program.

Excerpts from interview
with Michael J. O'Connell.

Michael J. O'Connell is the founder of Jeremiah Program (JP). He was an active leader in the organization from 1993 until 2009, is the namesake of their legacy fund, The Michael J. O'Connell Society, and remains a vocal advocate and supporter to this day. This essay was adapted from his recorded remarks in honor of JP's 25th anniversary.

The Foundation

In the fall of 1991, I became pastor of the church of The Basilica of Saint Mary. As I was beginning that job, the pastor of the Episcopal Cathedral asked me if I would join a board called Students with Children. The church had a school, and they organized Students with Children because there was also a community college, two vocational-technology schools, and a university right in this neighborhood. The idea of Students with Children was that lower-income moms who wanted to go to college could leave their children in the program, go to one of these schools for free, and their kids would be safe.

"The community itself—I call it the sisterhood—is the secret sauce."

— MICHAEL J. O'CONNELL

A month after I came, 38 families had registered for the Students with Children center. By October, it was down to 25 families. November was down to about 12, and by December, it was down to six.

It was a real conundrum: We thought that we were providing a great amenity for these young women. What was the problem?

I was curious, so much so that I started to look into the reality of these women's lives. I didn't know anything about them. All I knew was they were lower-income women with kids—who wanted to go to school.

What I found out was that there were dynamics in the families of these women that virtually forced them to leave school. They lived in a really complex world.

These women—highly intentioned, wanting to go to college, knowing how important it was for the well-being of their family—had 18 things that could go wrong in their life, any one of which could stop them dead in their tracks.

First of all, they had to deal with their income situation. Often, they had very unstable housing. The cars didn't work. The children got sick. There were all kinds of things that could stop a woman in the middle of her first semester if she didn't have the support system that she needed. That was the reality that became clear to me.

So, then, I thought, "What if we could create the semblance of a college dorm that would be a safe, affordable, and nurturing space for the whole family—mom and kids?" And that's how Jeremiah Program was born.

The Evolution

I looked across the street from the church, and there was a piece of property owned by the local power company, Northern States Power. Their philanthropy was trying to get safe, affordable housing for lower-income families, and I said, "Well, what if we build on your piece of property there?" And they essentially said, "Good idea!"

The first building was finished and ready for occupancy on New Year's Eve 1998. The first six families moved in, six more families moved in about three months later, and then the final six came after that. In 2002, we added another wing, doubled the size, and put in a world-class early childhood program so a mom could get up in the morning, fix breakfast for the kids, put the kids in the early childhood program, go out, work, go to school, and mostly feel safe.

What we found out is that this community of women and kids became a great support for each other. A lot of these women came in here thinking they were the only ones that had all this bad luck, only to find out there were a lot of people in the same situation. That sisterhood was a powerful thing, and it's still going on today.

Another piece of the puzzle was access. We live in Minneapolis, a fairly sophisticated city with all kinds of services. There are nonprofits in this city that probably deal with each one of the 18 things that could go wrong for women seeking an education. But what we found was that women in the program didn't have time to go out and find those services, much less coordinate them. So part of the inspiration for the program became consolidating all these scattered, well-intentioned nonprofits into a college dorm.

Early on, we knew we had to offer ... fundamentals of homemaking, working with your children, and organizing yourself to go to school with your family. The next thing they learned—and it really has proven to be a major part of success—is called Empowerment [and Leadership].

Empowerment is a very sophisticated process of learning. I call it spiritual Pilates. The woman comes into the program; often, fear is the wallpaper of her life. It's not whether something's going to go wrong—it's what and when and how much. But all of a sudden, you learn what, arguably, might be one of the most important words in the English language: No.

And the way you learn *no* becomes the way in which you, more and more, accept the fact that you are a very important person yourself. You have all the skills, all the tools, to be successful in life, and a lot of them have to do with knowing where you have to say no and meaning it. And all these women reinforce each other in getting that. The community itself—I call it the sisterhood—is the secret sauce.

The Future

Now JP is in nine cities around the country. One of the dynamics that is beginning to happen in some places—but I think probably in all places, eventually—is a version of the program that doesn't necessarily need the dormitory.

You can be in the sisterhood; you can learn the empowerment. ... There's a whole economy of scale. How do you give it away and not have to house it? So that's emerged out of the last five years as a way to double, if not triple, the number of people who can be involved.

I run into people from around the country, and I say, "Are there programs like this that consolidate services and teach empowerment?" There are not many. And so I'm wondering: What's the issue? Why can't there be more to do this?

In the next 10, 15, 25 years, I think there'll be a much greater awareness. I think the awareness is out there—it's almost in the clouds—that there is a very, very important population of people in our midst who have great capacity to be able to raise their families in a very successful way. ✚