

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF SAMUEL GONZALES
FOR THE WORKER & FAMILY SUPPORT SUBCOMMITTEE

Celebrating Fathers and Families: Federal Support for Responsible Fatherhood

June 11, 2019

Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Walorski and Committee Members:

Today, I am here all the way from Oklahoma to thank you for the investment you have made in me and my family.

I'm honored to have been chosen to share with you the story of how I've grown and changed as a man this past year — as a father, a husband and someone who works hard to provide for his family. One of the reasons I've been able to achieve good things for myself, my wife and our family is because I participated in the TRUE Dads fatherhood program. I've been told that TRUE Dads is paid for a Responsible Fatherhood grantee, overseen by the Office of Family Assistance in the Administration for Children and Families. What's more important to me is that you decided to fund programs like mine. As you hear what I have to say, hopefully you'll agree you got your money's worth.

The best way I can help you realize that is for me to share my personal story, letting you see some of my family's struggles and successes. I came all this way, and I'm doing something I never imagined I would do so that more fathers and families across the country will get to have the same kind of opportunity I had.

My story starts when I was a child.

Growing up as one of seven children, I knew my parents loved us. But with my father always on the road and my mother always working or tired, they were only able to provide so much in terms of relationship with us kids. I knew that if I were to ever become a husband and father, I wanted to do things differently. What I didn't think about was I didn't know exactly how to do that.

People become a dad in all kinds of ways. I became a father the first time when I started dating Kayla. She had a daughter when we met, and I knew they came as a package deal.

It is difficult for anyone to admit when they are struggling in their relationship, career or role as a parent. Or all three. But I think it's hardest for men. At least that's how I see it. You may know you need help, but it's hard to feel safe enough to let your guard down and trust that you'll find support, not judgment.

So when I was first referred to TRUE Dads, I was intrigued by the idea. I didn't know there was a place that helps dads learn about parenting and how to have better relationships. I couldn't believe that getting the help I needed would be free, which was important because I didn't have a lot of money to pay for something like that.

But I was also a bit nervous about signing up. I was glad to learn that Kayla would go with me to the workshops and that the program wanted to help us learn together about how I could become a great dad.

Fortunately, the curriculum, *On My Shoulders*, hooked me right off. The things we learned in our group made it seem like they were talking to us. They didn't just talk at us, either. We learned skills to make our relationship stronger and to be great parents because we practiced them as part of TRUE Dads.

For those of you that don't know what we learn in the workshops, I found the "speaker/listener technique" is one of the best skills. It has helped me communicate better with my family but also with my friends, employers and co-workers. The way it works is you use this tool called *The Floor*. and when you have the floor, you get to talk and the other person's job is to listen. Then you pass the floor to the other person. In passing the floor back and forth, it reminds us both when it is time to talk and when it is time to listen. The technique is pretty simple, but it takes practice to get the hang of it, which is why it was so helpful for them to let us practice with some help during our workshops.

Another thing Kayla and I learned in TRUE Dads that has stuck with us is the "three keys" to good relationships. They made it simple to remember. It goes like this: The first key is "decide, don't slide." That's where you make decisions and choices about your life and don't just let things happen to you. The second key is "make it safe," which is where the speaker/listener skill and timeout come in. And the third key is "do your part." These simple guidelines have made such a difference in our relationship.

Some programs only focus on one part of your life: work, family or your relationships. But life doesn't work that way for most of us. You have to work on all of those things to achieve your goals. If your marriage or relationship isn't going well, that's likely to impact your work and children in some way. Or, if you can't find work, that can put a strain on your most important relationships. That's what I found at TRUE Dads, a place that deals with your whole life.

So much happens in life that makes it hard to stay committed to something like TRUE Dads, but they made it easier. Since not everyone has a car and the buses in our city don't run at night, they provide taxis so everyone can get there. The meal before class allowed Kayla and I some rare time together with each other—and with other adults who are parenting together.

One of the conscious decisions I made during my time in the TRUE Dads program was to marry Kayla, officially becoming a father to her daughter and creating a more secure future for the baby that Kayla and I are now having together.

Previously, I wasn't totally sold on the concept of marriage: I'd been enjoying my freedom and the ability to do whatever I pleased. And Kayla's situation was complicated: She has a daughter through a previous relationship that was pretty traumatic for them both. I wasn't sure exactly how to deal with all of that or even how to bond with her daughter who had already been through so much.

But Kayla was special, and I knew I wanted to try. Through the information I learned and the skills taught in TRUE Dads, I was able to deepen my connection with both Kayla and her daughter, helping them to both feel safe. And I now consider her *my* daughter, no matter what her birth

certificate says. As she grows up, I want her to see me treating her mother with respect and to know that is how she also deserves to be treated.

Through TRUE Dads, I've grown not only in understanding what I have to offer as a father, but also in understanding the overall importance of fathers. I now know that children that don't live with a father are seven times more likely to experience teen pregnancy, four times more likely to experience poverty, twice as likely to drop out of school and more likely to be incarcerated.

Statistics like these help me remember that even with my faults, the simple fact that I love my children and am committed to being present in their lives will positively and profoundly impact their future.

With my wife, daughter and a new baby on the way, I'm loving life right now!

Still, there are challenges. While I came to TRUE Dads primarily for the relationship and parenting services, I realized there were also great employment services available, services I would end up needing. My career in construction requires lots of ongoing education and certifications, and not having one of those certifications ultimately led to me losing my last job when times got tight for the company.

TRUE Dads was there for me when I didn't have work. They let me use their job resource center, helped me with writing my resume and preparing job applications, and were available to answer questions and coach me into a new job that I start in two weeks. Even coming here and talking to you is a big step forward for me in building my confidence that I can be a leader.

I have a strong drive to provide for my family—even if that means lower-level work or personally going without. But it's also been great to learn about career pathways and have the support I need to get additional credentials to help me advance professionally. Through TRUE Dads, I've been able to get new certifications by participating in trainings, including CPR/first aid, certified safety manager, OSHA 510 and OSHA 30. In particular, the OSHA 30 training they helped me get has put me in a better position for career advancement and to make more money to support my family.

Kayla and I still have our ups and downs, like everyone else. We're not perfect, and we sometimes forget to put into practice what we've learned. But we try to use the skills on a daily basis—at home and with our friends and co-workers as well. When Kayla and I have conflict, we've learned how to allow each other some space and time to cool off before tackling the problem. We're also more deliberate now about spending quality time together. Instead of me playing video games and her napping, we try to do more shared activities, like fishing, to deepen our connection to one another. Coming here and spending a night in Washington DC is another memory we'll have together. I'm happy to say that Kayla and I know each other better and love each other more than we did when we first started the program.

I realize that not everyone has the benefit of being in an active or healthy relationship with their child's mother. I also know that there are other men like me that are stepping up to love a child that has another dad somewhere, and they may need help learning what it means to be a dad. I'm grateful that TRUE Dads allows men to engage in their program with another person that is also parenting the child. In our case, it allowed Kayla and me to learn how to work together better as parents.

Through my participation in the TRUE Dads program, I have greater knowledge of how to communicate, navigate conflict and more consistently demonstrate my love for my wife and family. I also have more confidence and greater control over my emotions.

I love life, and a huge part of that for me now is spending time with my wife and children, communicating well with them and making sure they never have reason to doubt that I will be an active part of their lives.

The TRUE Dads motto is “Win at parenting, work and relationships, so kids win at life.” We all want great jobs, positive interpersonal relationships and strong marriages. And I’m glad that TRUE Dads understands that in doing well as parents and partners, it also means that we are doing right by our children and their future.

Thank you for allowing me to share my story with you, and I hope it plays a part in helping people understand the importance of building the skills of fathers like me to provide for their children.

I started TRUE Dads as a single guy, doing what he wanted, and I’m finishing the program as a happily married man, with the prospect of a good job, and children that I love very much. I am confident in my ability to be a great father and am hopeful that I’ll be able to provide for my family’s needs for years to come.

Thanks to a group of people that believed in me, I’m now a TRUE Dad, through and through.