



Project Fatherhood: A Story of Courage and Healing in One of America's Toughest Communities

Jorja Leap

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A group of former gang members come together to help one another answer the question “How can I be a good father when I’ve never had one?”

In 2010, former gang leader turned community activist Big Mike Cummings asked UCLA gang expert Jorja Leap to co-lead a group of men struggling to be better fathers in Watts, South Los Angeles, a neighborhood long burdened with a legacy of racialized poverty, violence, and incarceration. These men, black and brown, from late adolescence to middle age, are trying to heal themselves and their community, and above all to build their identities as fathers. Each week, they come together to help one another answer the question “How can I be a good father when I’ve never had one?”

Project Fatherhood follows the lives of the men as they struggle with the pain of their own losses, the chronic pressures of poverty and unemployment, and the unquenchable desire to do better and provide more for the next generation. Although the group begins as a forum for them to discuss issues relating to their roles as parents, it slowly grows to mean much more: it becomes a place where they can share jokes and traumatic experiences, joys and sorrows. As the men repair their own lives and gain confidence, the group also becomes a place for them to plan and carry out activities to help the Watts community grow as well as thrive.

By immersing herself in the lived experiences of those working to overcome their circumstances, Leap not only dramatically illustrates the realities of fathers trying to do the right thing, but she also paints a larger sociological portrait of how institutional injustices become manifest in the lives of ordinary people. At a time in which racial justice seems more elusive than ever—stymied by the generational cycles of mass incarceration and the cradle-to-prison pipeline—the group’s development over time demonstrates real-life movement toward solutions as the men help one another make their families and their community stronger.

Project Fatherhood: A Story of Courage and Healing in One of America's Toughest Communities Details

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From Reader Review Project Fatherhood: A Story of Courage and Healing in One of America's Toughest Communities for online ebook

Earl says

In Project Fatherhood Jorja Leap accomplishes several extraordinary feats, not the least of which is documenting the beginnings and growth of the Project Fatherhood group in the Jordan Downs housing project of Watts. Each chapter does not only move us along chronologically but also thematically, each managing to both center around a particular meeting/theme while also moving outward (geographically, temporally and theoretically) then back in again to enrich our understanding.

The aspect of Leap's writing I found most appealing was its ability to touch on sociological theory (as well as other areas) without getting bogged down in theory. In fact, not only does she keep the book devolving into yet another theoretical discourse but she manages to let theory become manifest in the trials and tribulations of these men and the communities they represent. These men may represent the same community geographically but also many overlapping and oftentimes confrontational communities based on color, ethnicity, age and all of the same communities we all belong to.

This is a story of a housing project (Jordan Downs), a larger neighborhood (Watts), a city (Los Angeles) and so on. The difference between this work and many others is that the larger stories are told by telling the (far too often recurring) stories of the individuals who make their homes here.

Perhaps the single phrase that sprang to mind repeatedly while reading is from Patricia Hill Collins about the "overlapping systems of oppression" at work within communities like Watts. When I say "like Watts" I mean in a broad and inclusive sense to include any lower socioeconomic area, especially where people of color are concentrated. In these communities there is no simple answer to the problems because there is no single isolated cause but rather a matrix of oppression/domination that works to maintain a depressed community.

If one reads this with an open mind without jumping too quickly to any preconceived stock "solutions" to the problems, I believe many of the mistaken stereotypes of poverty will be dispelled and replaced with a more nuanced appreciation of the many forces which come together in these communities to help create and perpetuate the many myths of the poor.

Highly recommended for anyone and everyone willing to try to bracket his/her preconceived ideas long enough to engage with the text. There will be moments of discomfort and a reader must be willing to accept some discomfort in order to come to a better understanding.

Reviewed from a copy made available by the publisher via LibraryThing.

Aletha Pagett says

Excellent portrayal of men struggling to define manhood and learning to become good fathers while swimming in the morass of poverty and racism.

SundayAtDusk says

Author Jorja Leap, who was born in the mid-fifties and grew up in Los Angeles, can remember the riots in Watts in 1965. She had a Greek-American uncle, a high school history teacher, who explained to her the reasons for the rioting; explanations that were highly empathetic towards the blacks living in Watts. He obviously had a big influence in his niece's life, since she went on to become an expert on gangs and violence. Dr. Leap teaches at UCLA and has degrees in sociology, social work and psychological anthropology.

It was her MSW that got her involved in 2010 in Project Fatherhood, a father's group that was going to meet weekly in the Jordon Downs housing project in Watts. This book is about those fascinating, heartfelt meetings. Most men attending have been in prison, and many have children by multiple women. While they love their sons and daughters and refuse to say a bad word about their mothers, their relationships with their wives or girlfriends or "baby mamas" tend to be a mess, and fidelity is something most of them think is an amusing idea. Unemployment is a huge problem, as are alcohol, drugs and gangs. Most of these men also had no fathers around to show them how to be fathers, and were basically raised by the neighborhood or the gangs.

Yet, every week they show up in a room at the Jordan Downs community center and discuss fatherhood. They talk about their lives, their children's lives and the lives of all the children in the neighborhood. Topics covered include employment, education, corporal punishment, child abuse, child molesters, drugs, gang banging, relationships with "significant others", the "Big Mamas" of the old days, violence against women, prison, the LAPD, the courts, redevelopment, mentoring boys with no fathers. Some nights a recent tragic event or a happy event is shared by a member. One night two members of the Grape Street Crips showed up, as did Black Muslims on other nights. Those two groups didn't seem too pleased with the meetings. LAPD officers showed up at a couple of later meetings, which tended not to please the fatherhood group's members.

While Jorja Leap did an outstanding job describing Project Fatherhood and the residents of Watts, the book is not without problems. First, she claims to be shocked by some of the men's thoughts and comments, when it's hard to believe she could be so naive and shocked. Is it possible she's claiming such things because she is straddling fences, and does not want to be figuratively shot off the fence by either side? Second, she has included her own father memories and issues in the book, and quite frankly they all seem to stick out like a sore thumb, except for her comments about her uncle during the Watts riots. Her life is and was absolutely nothing like the lives of the men involved in Project Fatherhood.

This even gets a bit amusing when she decides to talk to the men about her "Papa" one night. Her "Papa" is a Jewish therapist she started seeing over 40 years ago, when she was in her first year of college. She explains to the readers how he said she could call him any time of the day and night, and she did, but says she tries not to call him at night now since he's in his 90s. She doesn't say if she still sees him for therapy and pays him; or discuss if it's totally wise to be so emotionally dependent on a therapist for so long. Instead, she states how she can't bear to think of him dying, leaving her with no father figure. Thus, one night she starts to tell the fathers in the group about her life and her "Papa", and how she so fears his death, since her own father is dead and her uncle just died.

She doesn't get to finish her story, however, because she is interrupted by one man in the group who "spits out" that most of them in the room never had even one father; while another man laughs that she should have shared her fathers with them. Dr. Leap says she then laughed, too, and believed she obviously received "the hood version of tough love". Tough love? It was probably more like the men were just trying to put a quick end to a crazy white woman story! Seriously, why would she think those men in Watts would or could in a million years relate to that story? Maybe Dr. Leap should write a memoir and put all her personal stuff in that type of book, instead of sociology books. Not that she didn't write a great sociology book here. She did.

Project Fatherhood: A Story of Courage and Healing in One of America's Toughest Communities is highly readable, highly informative, fascinating and touching at times. It may very well be one of the most interesting nonfiction books published this year. Also, according to the author's acknowledgements, all proceeds from this book go to the Project Fatherhood group.

(Note: I received a free ARC of this book from Amazon Vine.)

librarian4Him02 says

I received this through the early reviewer program over on librarything. Jorja Leap is a social worker who works with Project Fatherhood, a group of fathers seeking to mentor and support each other as they raise their children in the heart of Watts (Los Angeles, CA.). When I first read on the jacket flap blurb that Ms. Leap was trying to "paint a larger sociological portrait" I was afraid this was going to be a dry and clinical read.

Boy was I wrong. Ms. Leap brings not only expertise to this book, but also a talent for storytelling. She really brought the atmosphere and struggles of Watts to life for me. I came away feeling like I knew each of the father's and also a sense what difficult challenges they face.

I work in lower income neighborhood and believe that many of the youth I encounter daily come from families with no father around. Reading about Project Fatherhood and Ms. Leap's experiences with this group gave me hope that perhaps things can also turn around in the neighborhood where I work. Thank you, Ms. Leap

Michelle says

"Project Fatherhood: A Story of Courage and Healing in One of America's Toughest Communities" is about an incredible courageous community of 45 fathers who originally met in the South Los Angeles Watt's housing projects largely representing Jordan Downs, Nickerson Gardens, Imperial Courts in the vicinity, were all plagued by extreme poverty, substance abuse, crime, gang activity and too many young lives tragically lost to gun violence. This is also a story of united fatherhood, addressing the root cause of deep wounds and profound loss: fatherlessness. The inspirational change and redemption that followed, authored by anthropologist (and trained ethnographer) Jorja Leap, a wife, and mother of a step-daughter.

The origins of Project Fatherhood began in 1996, when Dr. Hershel Swinger identified children/youth suffering from a viscous cycle beginning with anxiety and depression, leading to increased rates of drug and alcohol abuse, school drop-outs, the alarming rates of crime and violence associated with gang affiliation, which connected with the criminal justice system. With fathers actively engaged in the lives of their children, this cycle could likely be broken, leading to a better life outcomes in the lives of these children/youth their families and communities. In 2010 Project Fatherhood was named as a "model program" by the Obama administration, and federal funding is available for intervention and training of this program for at risk children/youth.

Fathers who returned to their communities, many after years of incarceration related to drug related offences, violent and non-violent crimes, often with former gang affiliation. With felony convictions, gainful employment was desperately needed for fathers to maintain their pride and respectable standing within their families and community. Many of the fathers were impoverished, on disability or entitlement programs.

Facing additional undeniable challenges to father numerous children, with wives, girlfriends, multiple baby mamas, these men needed a great deal of help/support to assume their important responsible role in the lives of their children, realizing that their children needed them regardless of their social/economic status.

Leap, acted as one of the group facilitators, met once a week with the group, had her own ties to Watts, being raised in the area. There were various themes and topics required for discussion: some included fatherlessness, employment/job creation, child neglect/abuse, community, and The Nation. The LAPD was discouraged from attendance, as many fathers were understandably mistrustful of police related to injustice and brutality, weary of white privilege, dealing with racism, and the tragic and brutal consequences of losing so many of their own to addiction and/or gun violence. The individual stories were also an education of poor black American culture, that can move the strongest individual to tears. Project Fatherhood would eventually extend to youth outreach which promoted education combined with responsible choices, and avoiding drugs and violence for a better life; as these men reclaimed positive and active role models for their children and respected members and elders in their communities.

Charles says

"This book is the story of how one group of men, born and raised in Watts, in South Los Angeles, set out to answer that question ['as fathers, as men What are we gonna do?'], both within their families and in their community. Through a program called Project Fatherhood, the men met on a weekly basis to examine issues surrounding their roles as parents." Leap was there with them throughout the four years covered by the book as the social worker mandated by the funding grant. She was the right choice given her years of experience working with gangs in the area, her academic background (professor at UCLA), her decency, and her narrative ability. She gains the group's love and respect, allowing us then some insight into their lives and the challenges they face, bringing very much to life the meaning of concentrated disadvantage--poor, poorly educated, most have been to prison, and all most all struggle to find any employment despite their intense desire for it. Yet they continue to come together, learning not just how to father their own children, but themselves, each other, and their community.

Kris says

Ironically, I finished reading "Project Fatherhood" on Father's Day weekend. This is an interesting look into the sociology of fatherhood. While set in a Watt's housing project its participants are Latino or African American fathers. However it tells a larger story and that is one of fatherhood affected by poverty and class.

The project was funded to get fathers to come to sessions with a social worker and community leaders as well as Housing Authorities. In exchange for their participation, they would receive gift cards and information about parenting. What they got was much greater – the participants empowered themselves to create a support system for fathers. They also opened a window into what it means to be a father living in poverty.

In each chapter, the fathers discuss different concerns about their position in the family, in the community and in society. One thing that comes through crystal clear is the honest voices of the participants. They do not shy away from making statements that are at times confrontational or frank and at odds with what many middle and upper class people would consider proper social mores.

Everything is covered: abuse, raising daughters, baby mama's, the after effects of prison on themselves and their families, social supports, the roles of elders in the community and employment. In fact, the single most important running theme for all the men was the need for job creation in impoverished communities. If there is one fundamentally important message here it is that those who are poor and perhaps socially disadvantaged in many ways want to work. Employment provides people with a sense of identity, a role in the family and adds a measure of respect from the community. With one voice they ask over and over if this program and others introduced to their community will bring jobs.

This is an important book for anyone to read. It dispels myths about poverty; it provides important cultural insight into the African American community in particular and most importantly for those professionals wanting to assist impoverished communities it answers one of the most important questions "What can we do to help?" In their own words, the fathers in this program are telling you in plain English: Bring jobs to these communities. Real, long lasting employment for people who are not necessarily college educated and who have families (both nuclear and extended) to support.

This is one of those great sociological studies. If you loved "Nickel and Dimed" this is another entry in the social and cultural interest category worthy of public and academic interest.

Madlyn says

This book took me on an amazing journey ride and I will never forget it as I listened too each one of the men's life stories and how serious it meant to them in learning how to be a father in there children's lives.

Carol says

My eyes are poor so I struggled against the very small print to read a fascinating book of lessons that men coming from Jordan Downs in Watts taught themselves. This book pulled me into the world of the men of Watts and would not let me go. Each chapter seems like an intimate group therapy session as the men worked hard to define what a good father was and how to keep their children from making the mistakes that they had made.

Years ago, the author stayed in her uncle's home and they watched Watts burn and being looted. Her uncle taught her about the system being against them and that the riots were expected. Many years later, Jorja Leap and Big Mike Cummings co-lead the original group of Project Fatherhood. The men signing up could get gift cards and information on how to parent.

Not having a father was the norm in this area. The men asked themselves, how could they know how to be a father without ever having one? As many sad stories of neglect, absent fathers, and child abuse poured out, the men were challenged to find out what being a good father means. And it was very difficult so they had to help each other. They had to learn to trust each other and to feel that they were fathers in group.

The author had to learn their lingo and also realize that their mores were different. She had to push them to help themselves.

This book is very inspiring, it shows that together, even there were no best solutions to the problems, the group could work together to find alternatives that would work better than those tried before.

I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in what makes a good father and how difficult the problems are when living in a poor area without job opportunities and enormous challenges every day.

I received a finished copy from the publishers as a win from LibraryThing in exchange for a fair review. That in no way influenced my thoughts or feelings in this review.

Christina says

Drjorjaleap, as she is known in Watts, provides a bird's eye view into the mindset and culture of men from the "ghetto," similar to "Gang Leader for a Day" although more personal and limited in scope than Venkatesh's bestseller. But Leap's work is an important one, revealing the strengths and weaknesses of the culture of poverty that could provide a springboard to boosting this neglected community.

This book was far more evenhanded in its style and tone than Leap's first book "Jumped In." Although she still veered somewhat into her white middle-class viewpoint and the terrain of her personal life, it was less intrusive and annoying than in the previous book.

This book is a must-read for anyone interested in urban issues. What also comes through loud and clear is Leap's dedication, persistence and affection for her adopted community. Brava! I look forward to her next fascinating work.

Rachel says

I have incredibly mixed feelings about this book. My biggest issue is with the author herself, and how poorly she seems to understand white privilege. She addresses it very briefly and checks herself occasionally, but not nearly enough. She admits to being sensitive to being deemed not "hood" enough but perhaps doesn't realize just how much time she spends trying to justify her "hoodness" or her right to be there and call Watts home; in fact, I felt that one of the climaxes of the book was around her being "accepted" by the group at last, and needing that pat on the back. Those are her issues and I'm happy for her that they seemed to get sorted out, but they are extremely shallow issues compared to what the participants of Project Fatherhood are facing and she should have focused more on the men and less on her own insecurities. I applaud Project Fatherhood and the changes it's bringing to Watts, and I'm happy to have learned about this amazing initiative through this book.

Lynn says

A book about a program in Watts called Project Fatherhood: which provides men with the the chance to reconnect with a son and build their lives up out of poverty. Big Mike Cummmings and UCLA gang expert Jorja Leslie run the group with mixed results. By 2012, government funds dry up and individuals try to satisfy some needs without the group.

Elaine Conte says

Another audio book on Hoopla. This is the true story of a group of fathers from the projects in LA who meet weekly to try to be better fathers to their sons than their fathers were to them so they can break the cycle of violence and crime to give their kids a better life. An inspirational story but a bit repetitive at times.

Michelle Olms says

Great book
