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Raising Kevion

By JASON DePARLE

In a worn town house on the edge of Milwaukee, a father and son are lying in bed. A bag of Pampers spills across the floor beside boxes of juice bottles and soda cans, stashed so the older kids won't drink them. Mounds of laundry flank the bed -- clean to the north, dirty to the south -- as bare-chested men on TV chant about pistols and weed. "I been having this TV forever," the father says with a yawn. "Bought it in, like, '96 from a hype" -- a drug addict. "Gave her two bags for it. It was like 6 o'clock in the morning. She was fiending for a hit."

The father is six feet tall with a linebacker build, copper skin and soft hair, which until recently he kept in a ponytail. He says that light skin and long hair, a lure for women, were among his main assets when he worked as a drug dealer and pimp. So were quick fists. "You can pay me or pay the doctor," he used to say. His boxer shorts end just above a three-inch scar from a prison knife and cover the gunshot wound in the groin that nearly killed him. His 2-year-old son isn't feeling well, but the hollering of the rappers on BET perks him up. He raps in gibberish.

"This guy I know, Blue, came over," the father says, continuing the story. "He said a girl wanna sell her TV. She was in bad shape -- skinny, crackish, she wanted a hit bad. Actually, I don't even believe it was her TV." With a built-in VCR, the set was worth more than \$500. Finding the woman, he offered her two \$10 bags of crack. "That's what I'd always say." And if the woman with the bug eyes and bad breath argued, he would cut the offer in half. It was a strategy that netted not only a cache of home electronics but five cars. From the sunrise television thief, he earned more in 15 minutes than he now makes in a week.

He yawns some more. He was on the job delivering pizzas till 11 p.m., then up half the night as usual, in the basement mixing raps. His pay stubs come to Kenyatta Q. Thigpen, but in the basement he's 40 Kal Yatt, would-be star of the Killa G's. Beneath the piles of laundry are notebooks filled with his raps, which amid the standard paeans to Glocks and rocks, thank God for the birth of his son. The son, Kevion, is starting to fuss. "You hungry? Huh? You hungry, baby? C'mon, Teebie, let's go get you something to eat." Ken sits on the bed, and the boy climbs up for a piggyback ride. Forty and his shorty head down the stairs. It is time for Barney.

The child's mother, Jewell Reed, left the house at 5:30 a.m. for her job at a nursing home -- she spent eight years on welfare but left the rolls long ago, as soon as Wisconsin's work rules kicked in -- and her 15-year-old, Terrell, with whom Ken has been feuding, is at summer school. Tremmell, 12, Jewell's middle son, has been sleeping past noon, so at 10, Ken and Kevion have the house to themselves. Ken isn't the father of the older boys, which is a source of intermittent conflict. He fusses at Jewell in absentia for not buying eggs. As though she heard him, the phone rings. "You up?" she says.

"Man, I been up," Ken says.

"Kevion still got a fever?"

"He feels sorta warm, so I don't know. I gotta take his temperature."

"Put it up under his arm and just hold his arm down."

"Yeah, I was thinking about doing that."

With the receiver broken, Ken is using the speakerphone, and Jewell sounds excited when Kevion giggles. "That him?" she asks.

"I was gonna fix us some eggs, but there ain't none," Ken complains.

"I bought some. They're on the shelf."

Something beyond eggs is bothering Ken. "What you doin'?" he says. "Why you sneaking up on the phone?"

"I ain't sneaking. I'm just seeing is y'all up and what is y'all doing."

Jewell signs off with a pledge to call again, and Ken tells the echoing dial tone his real complaint. "She don't even need to be calling," he says. "I do a helluva job with Kevion."

It's a job, he is quick to add, that most men he knows aren't doing. Not Terrell's daddy, Boon, who hasn't been seen since Terrell was in diapers, or Tremmell's father, Tony, who dotes on him with cards but sends them from a prison where he's serving 85 years. Not Jewell's old boyfriend Lucky, who drank too much to hang on to a job, or her brother Robert, who has been jobless and living in the basement after serving nearly six years for shooting at two undercover cops. "I'm about the best man a woman could ever have -- in history," Ken says. "Cause all I do is work, come home, pay bills and take care of Kevion."

Nearly a decade has passed since the country "ended welfare" with a landmark bill imposing time limits and work requirements, and low-skilled women like Jewell have entered the work force in record numbers. But low-skilled men have not. And low-skilled black men, the sea in which Jewell has spent her life swimming, have continued to leave the job market at disconcerting rates, even during the late-90's boom. In cutting the rolls and increasing work, the 1996 welfare law, and a related expansion of services, has been celebrated as a rare, even unique, triumph, and on one level it is. But with about 90 percent of welfare families headed by single mothers, it is also a lesson in the limits of a policy that is focused on one sex. Whatever it has done to put women to work, it won't really change the arc of inner-city life until it -- or something -- reaches the men.

I spent the last seven years following three welfare recipients in one extended family: Jewell, her cousin Opal Caples and their best friend, Angela Jobe, who by having kids with Jewell's brother Greg is counted as kin. Across six generations of poverty, the family story encompasses slavery, sharecropping (on the Mississippi plantation of the late Senator James O. Eastland) and the migration north, first to Chicago and then onto the welfare rolls of Milwaukee. A common assumption about ghetto life -- that generations have been raised without seeing anyone go to work -- ill fits this or most other welfare families. Growing up in Chicago, Jewell, Opal and Angie each had working mothers, and each of them worked sporadically themselves even while drawing a welfare check. The working mother with a passel of messed-up kids is a staple of the inner city.

What's really missing from the family story are stable fathers. None of the trio had one growing up, and neither -- until Kevion -- have their kids. At one point or another, virtually everyone in their network of family and friends -- mothers, grandmothers, boyfriends and children -- has described the absence of a father as a painful, life-altering loss. Dig down almost anywhere in their world, and you hit a geyser of father-yearning.

"*Yeah*, I wish I had a father," Jewell's oldest son, Terrell, said.

"I just know my life would be different if my father was around," Angie's son, DeVon, said.

"Way different," Jewell's middle son, Tremmell, said.

Of all the father-yearners, none is more vocal than Ken, who at 32 is still writing raps about his feelings of paternal abandonment and whose desire for a father runs so deep that he has nicknamed his son Daddy. Ken was in prison when I first met Jewell, serving two years for selling crack, and when I picked him up at the prison gate four years ago, I figured he would soon be back in jail. Instead, he has been working ever since, for the last three years as a delivery man for a chicken-and-pizza place, and in a world where missing fathers are the norm, he has been a notably present one, tending Kevion while Jewell is at work and then leaving for his nightly rounds. As Congress revisits the welfare bill to write the second act, there's a conversation under way about how to help more men make the new start Ken has made, toward employment, responsible fatherhood or (most ambitiously) marriage -- one step he has refused to take, despite Jewell's entreaties. Ken's story is a reminder that help is sorely needed and that the ground to be covered is immense.

he odometer on the brown '89 Seville shows 164,000 miles. The sagging roof upholstery is fixed with safety pins. There's a dashboard cavity where the radio once sat and a glowing red light that demands "Service Engine Soon." The sign in the window -- "\$1,000 or Best Offer" -- falls somewhere between an ad and a plea. At 5 p.m., Ken is on the job at a northwest Milwaukee takeout joint called Gianelli's Pizza and Chicken Man.

His first stop is a blocklong nursing home, where he is unsure which entrance to use. The ticket says to call first, and punching his cellphone, he finds himself caught in a chicken conspiracy. "Downstairs . . . ay-aight . . . I got you," he says. It's not a senior craving wings but a nursing aide getting a jump on her break. "She sneaking," he says, laughing. "What if somebody falls out of they bed, and she's down here getting Gianelli's?" Finding the nervous aide at a side door, he hands over \$23 worth of chicken snack packs, empathizes with her lament that she forgot to order hot sauce and pockets a tip of 10 shiny dimes. It could be worse. Later in the week, he posts successive tallies of 66 cents, 61 cents, 7 cents (twice), 32 cents, 12 cents and 48 cents. Then, again, "this drunk dude" once handed him a \$100 bill for a \$50 order, so "you gotta take the good with the bad." A trip to the mall to buy new dog tags has put Ken in a carefree mood. One tag says "40 Kal Yatt." Another, even more special, reads "Kevion. Daddy Lil Boy."

The prospects are better at his next stop, a low-slung box of apartments where a middle-aged hippie regularly gets the munchies. "This dude tips good," Ken says. A guy in a black T-shirt emerges, looking like Bob Seger and smelling like a rock concert. Ken hands him \$15 worth of fried fish and jalapenos and starts to break a \$20 bill, just slowly enough to drop a hint. "Gimme back -- oh, just keep it, man," Bob Seger says, either in solidarity or because he is too stoned to do the math. "Good looking," Ken says. He aims the Caddy toward Gianelli's and sticks in a disc of the Killa G's, when some unfamiliar percussion intrudes. His side-view mirror, escaped from its socket, is slapping against the door. A pit stop later, he's back in a line of jalopies, waiting to refill a red vinyl bag stained with the grease of a thousand dead birds.

Just by showing up every day, Ken is bucking a trend. In 1979, 62 percent of young, unskilled black men reported having jobs. A decade later, it was 59 percent, and by the end of the 90's, it was 52 percent. (The parallel employment rate among whites and Hispanics was nearly 80 percent.) Theories abound of the poor black man's blight: low skills, disheartening wages, the flight of urban jobs, high incarceration rates, employer discrimination even toward those with no criminal record. Does anyone attract more suspicion than a young black man? Increased enforcement of child support may also play a role, since a man in arrears can have up to 65 percent of his wages garnished -- a danger that has pushed several of Ken's friends into unreliable off-the-books work. The spread of fatherless families is often described as an effect of unemployment. But fatherlessness may also be a cause of unemployment, since it deprives young men of the employment networks a father can provide. To these theories, Ken appends one more: the pure seduction of the streets. At 18, he wouldn't have been caught dead with a pizza bag. "I was like, I ain't working no job -- I'll hustle," he says. "How people gonna respect me if I'm delivering pizzas?" Say what you will about selling drugs, but "it's a nice image."

Not so nice was jail. By the time he moved from Chicago to Milwaukee at 25, Ken had spent half his adult life behind bars. At that point, Jewell, who is three years older, was living with Lucky, one of Ken's friends, and about to leave the welfare rolls. Lucky was drunk, Ken was fun and Jewell was lonelier than she had understood. Her not-so-furtive affair with Ken fueled two years of gossip among her friends, until she finally put Lucky out. Ken moved in, and the next month he was back in prison, facing two years. Jewell's friends said she would be crazy to wait that long. Jewell, in love like never before, waited anyway.

One factor that occasioned Ken's rethinking of crime was old-fashioned punishment: he was stunned when he was turned down for parole. Soon after, he enrolled (and excelled) in a prison masonry class. But back in Milwaukee, he couldn't get hired. A few weeks after his release, Ken was in the classic ex-con's state -- frustrated, vulnerable, adrift -- when a prison buddy dropped off an ounce of cocaine, a little gift to kick-start sales. The scene played out like a cartoon, with an elf perched on each shoulder. Take it. Don't. He hated being broke. He hated prison more. He declared himself out of the trade.

As an ex-con looking for honest work, Ken had some advantages over his peers. He is articulate and personable. He doesn't smoke, drink or use drugs. And since he didn't have children, he didn't owe back support. He also credits Jewell, who was loath to see him back in jail. "When you have a positive influence, you can't do anything but positive things," he says. He spent a year at a fly-by-night outfit, filling barrels with hazardous waste, then answered a want ad for Gianelli's. The image -- pizza man -- is worse than the money. With salary and tips, he says he makes about \$20,000 a year, and the nightly rhythm recalls his old ways: he can roam the city, flirt with clients and bring home the proceeds in cash.

As he started the job, one thing was missing. "That should be us," Ken said one night, as a couple on television cuddled their baby. The prospects weren't good. Jewell had uterine fibroids, and Ken feared that his gunshot wound had left him sterile. So they were astonished when Jewell emerged from the bathroom one day with a positive pregnancy test. The fibroids brought unbearable pain and forced a risky first-trimester operation, with a slim chance of saving the pregnancy. Nearly two months of bed rest followed -- then the baby shower, which Ken prowled with a video camera and a button on his shirt that said "Dad." Kevion's birth (I became his godfather) gave Ken the ultimate reason to stay out of jail. "I'm trying to be my son's role model," he says. "You can't sell drugs and not go to jail, that's one thing I learned. It's the wrong thing to invest in."

Reloaded with four pepperoni pizzas, Ken continues the story on the run. With Jewell pining for a wedding ring, it is missing its fairy-tale ending. She has wanted to marry him for years. Stop "waiting on some Miss America or Miss Hollywood to come to your life," she wrote him when he was still in prison.

"You may not be that Miss Hollywood or Miss America as you say, but you are everything in a woman that a man could want," he wrote back. "Sense of humor, best friend . . . a great lover. . . . You are like a dream." But as a man who once sold sex retail, Ken has a hard time putting his faith in eternal fidelity. Once, when Jewell came home from bingo with \$200, the first thing that crossed Ken's mind was that it might have been a gift from a man.

"Oh, here goes a cheap dude here," he says, recognizing the next address. Sure enough, a \$23.66 order brings him 34 cents from a guy who could pass as Willie Horton's twin. "Dude looks nasty," Ken says. "I probably should have tipped him." Getting stiffed doesn't get him down. "I look at it like this: They don't have to give you anything -- it's their money," he says. As his shift ends early, he seems like a man who has OD'd on good-attitude pills. He can accept the 7 cent tips and the chicken grease. He can accept the dangling side mirror. What he can't accept is the first thing he sees as he arrives back home, a group of teenage boys spilling out the door despite his "No visitors while I'm gone" rule.

The yard turns into a blur of disjointed images. Ken screaming at Jewell's 12-year-old, Tremmell. Ken knocking him in the chest. Terrell sticking up for his younger brother. *He didn't have them in the house -- I did.* As in, *What are you gonna do about it?* As in -- the real subtext here -- *You ain't my daddy! You can't tell me what to do!* Then Ken and Terrell are facing off in the driveway, exchanging chest shoves. Warning of the whipping he is about to inflict, Ken goes inside to shed his "Kevion. Daddy Lil Boy" dog tag (and maybe, without knowing it, to de-escalate), and Terrell takes the chance to cool-walk away, having saved face in front of his friends. They were a chest-bump shy of Armageddon.

Fifteen minutes later, Ken is still a portrait of rage. "What he needs to get through his head is, I'm the only daddy he's got!" he says. "'Cause his real daddy don't care nothing about him, and that dude he calls his daddy got 85 years. The shirt, the do-rag, all the way down to the drawers that he got on -- that comes from me." Leaving the house, he is holding Kevion like a security blanket. "See, my son ain't gonna pull this, no kind of way, 'cause Kevion's gonna know how to respect me. I'm raising him from birth!"

No one really raised Ken, at least not for very long. His childhood played out as a fleeting idyll, ruined by crack cocaine. Until halfway through grade school, he had the most popular, cookie-baking mother on the block. But once his parents got hooked on the drug, he said, he spent the rest of his childhood monitoring their smoke parties and refereeing their brawls. "Can you imagine what it was like to come home every day and see your dad acting like he was trying to kill your mom -- and your mom acting like she don't care, just wanna get high?" he said. "Can you imagine?" Losing their house, the Thigpens split up, and his mother moved to a shelter. Ken stole cars, lived here and there and finished raising himself. He managed to patch things up with his mother, but forgiving his father came harder. "I feel like, if he'd a been there, I'd be in a different spot than I am today," he said.

The evidence is on his side: mounds of social science, from the left and the right, leave little doubt that the children of single-parent families face heightened risks. Kids can overcome it, and they do all the time, but for someone growing up poor, having just one parent amounts to a double dose of disadvantage. A generation ago, the effects of family structure were the subject of much greater dispute; now several large data sets give contemporary scholars an empirical edge. "Growing Up With a Single Parent," a 1994 book by the sociologists Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, remains a definitive text.

In our opinion, the evidence is quite clear: *Children who grow up in a household with only one biological parent are worse off, on average, than children who grow up in a household with both of their biological parents, regardless of the parents' race or educational background.* . . . [They] are twice as likely to drop out of high school, twice as likely to have a child before age 20 and one and a half times as likely to be "idle" -- out of school and out of work -- in their late teens and early 20's. [Italics in the original.]

They are also more likely to commit crimes. As for why kids usually benefit from having a stable father at home, there are multiple theories, and Ken seems to have mulled over them all. There's a second income that fathers generally bring and a second set of hands. There's the added stake that live-in fathers tend to feel they have in their children. There's emotional bonding. There's discipline. "I feel like every kid should have a father in his life," Ken said. "Someone to play that manly role, to give them that loud voice when they need it, to show them discipline, throw a football -- all that." There's also what sociologists call "social capital," the network of worldly connections that fathers can bequeath. That's a role that leaves Ken particularly wistful. As a high-school linebacker with a vicious hit, he received some letters of interest from college recruiters, which fell by the wayside at home. He has never shed the sense that in another life, with the help of a father, he might have gone on to college and even the pros. Instead, a few weeks after graduating from high school, Ken started selling crack, and father-absence took a more intimate toll. Ken started feuding with his mother's boyfriend, and the boyfriend shot him in the testicles.

Ken's childhood neighborhood offers another look at the risks of fatherlessness. A stronghold of the Gangster Disciples, stocked with guns and drugs, Jeffrey Manor, in the southeastern corner of Chicago,

sounds like a familiar pocket of urban poverty. But it wasn't poor: the poverty rate in Ken's census tract, 10 percent, was 2 points below the national average. Nine of 10 families owned their own homes. Indeed, the only lens through which the Manor seemed "at risk" was in the abundance of single-parent families. According to the 1980 census, a third of the neighborhood kids were being raised by single parents, twice the United States average. Writing in 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, America's prophet of family decline, warned that a "community that allows a large number of young men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority . . . asks for and gets chaos. Crime, violence, unrest, disorder . . . that is not only to be expected; it is very near to inevitable." That's pretty much how Ken nostalgically describes the block. "You come to the neighborhood with your hat the wrong way, I'm kicking some butt," he said.

Jewell, who grew up a few houses away, moved to Milwaukee in 1991. As Ken arrived five years later, Wisconsin was forcing welfare recipients to perform community service for their checks, and Jewell quickly left the rolls. ("Ain't no way I would wanna be working for free when I could be working somewhere and getting paid!" she said.) Despite little experience and no high-school diploma, she eventually landed a job on the shipping line of an industrial toolmaker. But work was just something she did. What she cared about was Ken, who after her unhappy years with Lucky, provided an oasis of innocent fun. He liked bowling, theme parks and video games. He taught her to drive a stick. She felt so close that she says she sometimes imagined they were the same person. "He's the male version, I'm the female," she said.

That Ken sold drugs wasn't something she considered notable. "That's every black man's job," she said. The sex trade was something she knew less about. But Jewell wasn't one to pass judgments, and Ken found that it brought that coveted commercial force: synergy. Selling drugs, he met women who wanted to sell sex. Selling sex helped him sell more drugs, since half the johns got high. His products went together, he said, "like Bonnie and Clyde." Someone with a psychoanalytical bent might wonder if in beating up various hookers and crack fiends, he was channeling the rage he felt at another addict, his mother. But Ken didn't have such a bent. He liked making money, and if he had to use a baseball bat to collect his drug debts, he did what he had to do. "I was a pure-D monster," he said.

"B-B-B-B-Bad to the bone," Jewell said.

He was also a self-appointed father figure -- or, at least, generous uncle -- to the kids in the transplanted Chicago clan. The trio of women -- Jewell, Opal and Angie -- were raising 10 children, none of whom had a steady father in their lives. That's an old family story. Jewell's mother, Hattie Mae, was born to unwed teenage parents on the Eastland family plantation. Hattie Mae's father left to join the Army, and Hattie Mae once went 15 years without hearing from him. In his absence, she was sexually abused and had her first child at 13.

Jewell knew her father even less. Hattie Mae left him when Jewell was a year old, and the family never saw him again. A defining trait of Jewell's childhood -- perhaps the defining trait -- was her loathing of Hattie Mae's live-in boyfriend (and eventual husband), Wesley. "Living with somebody you hate" is how Jewell put it, and the feeling accounted for her decision to become pregnant in high school; weary of the unhappy home, she wanted someone to love.

Boon, the teenage neighbor with whom she had her child, quickly disappeared. He resurfaced in Minnesota five years ago and proposed a visit with his son, Terrell, who was then 10. "He's not gonna come," Terrell told Jewell, and it pained her on the appointed weekend when the 10-year-old proved right. The man Terrell calls his father, Tony Nicholas, is his brother Tremmell's dad. He has been in prison for murder since Terrell was 2, but Terrell says that Tony, unlike Ken, has "been there for me since I was little." Tremmell, born after the arrest, has never seen his father outside a prison wall. "He'll be out in 2034!" he said.

A parallel story resides on Angie's branch of the family tree. She did know her father -- knew him as a drunk. "Wanna marry my mama?" she once asked a city bus driver as a little girl. "I want a daddy!" Still, her feelings toward her father ran so deep that she credits them for her decision, after leaving welfare, to become a nursing aide. She saw her father for the last time just before she moved to Milwaukee, and she was stunned at how sick he had become; she had to help him use the bathroom. A month later, he was dead. Taking on a caregiver's job, she said, was her way of making amends. "I felt so guilty -- I did not do anything for him," she said. "I was mad at him, yeah, but . . . he was still my daddy."

Like plants bending toward a distant sun, her kids have shaped their lives around an absent father, too. The father of the oldest three is Greg -- Jewell's brother and Angie's great love. He was involved in the same murder as his friend Tony; Greg got 65 years. Angie's oldest child, Kesha, was 7 when she watched the police take her father away. In her airbrushed memory of the scene, they bring him back, remove the shackles and let a father give his little girl a parting embrace. Nearly a decade later, Kesha chose a cross-town high school with a pre-law program. "I always told my daddy that I was gonna be his lawyer and help him get out," she said. She became pregnant and dropped out instead; she broke the news of the pregnancy to her child's father at his eighth-grade graduation and scarcely heard from him again.

While Kesha missed her father in a misty, little girl's way, her brother Redd missed him with raw fury. He battled Angie's boyfriends. He piled up school suspensions. He answered male authority with the same challenge and lament that his cousin Terrell now aims toward Ken: "You ain't my daddy." Among the papers scattered in the bottom of Redd's closet was a middle-school essay called "A Grimmer Mouse." "I found him in the woods crying in a box," it reads. "I took him home and tried to feed him." I asked Redd why the mouse had been crying. "Cause he was just left out there by himself," he said. "Somebody who was supposed to be bathing him, feeding him, washing him and stuff wasn't doing it." Then he stopped and looked up. Until then, he said, he hadn't realized that he had been writing about himself. "That's about my daddy," he said. "He wasn't here."

For a while, Ken was. He rode into town as Mr. Cool, a fun-loving gangster always ready for an excursion or a round of video games. He sent Kesha clothes-shopping with one of his prostitutes. He took the boys to play basketball. He treated them to McDonald's and took them to the city's summer festival. "He spent more time with us than anybody," Redd said. "When we were little, he used to be cool," Terrell said.

That was eight years ago. Ken is no longer a swashbuckling badman but a guy whose car smells of tomato sauce, trying to lay down some rules. No friends in the house. No calls after midnight. Buckle down in school. "Now that he's there, we have to read books, go to summer school, do times tables," Tremmell complained. Behind his back, some of the kids in the extended family snicker that delivering pizzas is "gay." "When he was selling drugs, he was cool," one of the cousins said. "I guess being in jail made him all soft," another said. Twice over the last year, arguments with Ken led Terrell to move out temporarily. "Yeah, I know I'm not your father," he said to himself one day. "But I'm gonna treat y'all like y'all my sons. Y'all not gonna get to the point where you break me and Jewell up."

ebating welfare a decade ago, the authors of the 1996 bill weren't wholly unmindful of the men: three of the bill's four stated goals pay tribute to the two-parent family. The problem, then and now, was that no one knew how to legislate a dad. Moving millions of women from welfare to work was a challenge of vast proportions, but at least it proceeded from a template: there were past programs, evaluations, offices and staffs. In looking to shore up the two-parent family, Congress had no place to start -- not even any certainty that welfare had played a role in its decline. Scholarly evidence was slight. The bill spelled out how work programs would run (and bolstered child-support collection) but let the states decide what if anything to do to influence family structure. Most did nothing. If the bill had a theory about promoting fatherhood, it was that once poor mothers went to work, they would demand more from the opposite sex.

At about the same time in the mid-90's, the graph line took an intriguing turn: after galloping upward for decades, the share of children born outside marriage began to stabilize. But it has stabilized -- actually inched up a bit -- at a disturbing high. Thirty-four percent of American children are now born to single mothers -- 23 percent of whites, 43 percent of Hispanics and 68 percent of blacks. Even as the trend plateaued, the reasons remain unclear. Despite Wisconsin's famously tough crackdown on welfare, nonmarital births rose. In the District of Columbia, with permissive welfare rules, nonmarital births dropped the most. Along with tougher welfare laws, the past decade has brought a service expansion in child care, health insurance and wage subsidies. But since these efforts were mostly aimed at custodial parents, this new safety net mostly benefited women.

Here and there, some experimental programs arose to help poor men become better fathers. They typically offered services like job training and drug treatment in exchange for the fathers' agreement to acknowledge paternity and pay child support. Many included "peer support" sessions -- a kind of group counseling -- in which the men shared their thoughts about their relationships with their kids. The counseling, which was generally more successful than job-placement efforts, challenged the stereotype of the men as cavalier. Like Ken, many seemed deeply hurt by their own fathers' abandonment and talked of wanting to break the cycle, even as, unlike Ken, most perpetuated it. Marriage was sometimes discussed in these sessions, but often as a vague or distant goal.

For a moment, the programs attracted a swell of bipartisan support. A bill to provide modest federal support (\$140 million over four years) passed the House in 2000 with more than 400 votes. "If you're going to solve the problem of poverty, you've got to do what you can to make these guys marriage material," said Representative E. Clay Shaw Jr., a Florida Republican and leading supporter. But other conservatives feared that the programs blessed a status quo in which the father was out of the house. Even cohabitating parents -- like Ken and Jewell -- are inherently unstable, they said, since nearly 40 percent of such couples break up by the time their child turns 3. Responsible fatherhood, the case went, starts with a stable marriage.

In 2002, such arguments led to a sharp policy shift: a proposal by President Bush to redirect \$200 million a year in federal welfare funds toward programs that help low-income couples form and sustain "healthy marriages." The move from fatherhood to marriage, depending on your perspective, either incisively diagnoses the real problem or hubristically pushes government into a realm where it doesn't belong and can't succeed. Versions of the healthy-marriage proposal have passed the House twice, but the larger bill (to reauthorize the 1996 law) is deadlocked in the Senate over unrelated provisions.

Both supporters and critics of the Bush plan start with the same research finding: upon the birth of their child, about two-thirds of unwed parents say they strongly intend to marry. But within the next year and a half, only about 13 percent do. (The numbers come from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study at Princeton, a treasure trove of data about poor, unmarried couples.) To Wade Horn, the Bush administration's "marriage guru," that shows he has a product that's wanted. "We're not going into low-income communities and saying, 'Hey, guess what -- there's this thing called marriage, and you ought to have one,'" he said. On the contrary, he said he sees himself "matching our services to the aspirations they have." Horn argues that the needy have plenty of places to go for things like child care or training, while no social service bureaucracy takes seriously this "primal" need.

Horn, an assistant secretary in the Department of Health and Human Services, is a skilled spokesman for his cause, and he takes pains not to overpromise. There's a literature that shows marriage education to be helpful in preserving existing unions. But it's mostly a white, middle-class literature that doesn't speak directly to couples like Ken and Jewell. And there's hardly any good evidence to suggest that a program can encourage healthy marriages among those who haven't wed. The bill contemplates "public advertising campaigns," "education in high schools on the value of marriage" and "premarital education and marriage-skills training," with all participation voluntary. Under some conditions, services like job training or drug

treatment could also be included, though how often that would happen is unclear. Some supporters of the administration plan suggest that it could happen quite a lot; the legislative language seems more restrictive. (How this plays out in practice could be essential both to the programs' effectiveness and to the political support they command.) What could a marriage course achieve, assuming that Jewell and Ken would attend? "It might do a lot, and it might do nothing," Horn said. "But we do know that if you do nothing, that's the result you'll get."

To much of the left, the finding that the poor want to marry suggests that marriage education is beside the point. Some simply see no role for government in such an intimate decision. Some worry that marriage promotion will encourage women to stay with violent men. Many argue that what's holding poor men back is the lack of economic stability: make more men "marriageable," they say -- by helping them get decent jobs -- and more men will marry. Three prominent liberal analysts (Peter Edelman, Harry J. Holzer and Paul Offner) have laid out a countervailing employment agenda for disadvantaged young men that includes apprenticeship and mentoring programs, wage subsidies, community-service jobs, training programs and case management for ex-cons. The Center for Law and Social Policy, a Washington research and advocacy group, proposes a program called Marriage Plus, with an expansive social-service agenda that includes housing aid and drug treatment.

For the challenges that either approach might face, the story of Ken and Jewell is instructive. Marriage was the last thing on Jewell's mind when she became pregnant in high school, and it is virtually impossible to imagine the counselor who could have dissuaded her from single motherhood. Her older sister, a single mother herself, all but begged her not to start down the same hard path. "I had been thinking about it for a long time," Jewell said. "I just wanted something of my own, something that's mine, that I could love. I just wanted a baby, just wanted one. Even though I wasn't working, I didn't have my own place, whatever -- I still wanted a baby." As for the subsequent men in her life, neither marriage nor Marriage Plus would seem to have been a plausible solution. Boon vanished. Tony shot and killed a 14-year-old girl. Lucky stayed so drunk that Jewell, who wanted another baby, ruled out having his.

Then, again, now there's Ken, who is in the house and has an income and has at least articulated marriage as a goal. When Jewell became pregnant with Kevion, Ken thought they would finally wed. "I had told my mother that I thought she was a good person, she having my son -- I felt like she was the one," he said. "It just didn't happen." He said he doesn't know why, but he does know, at least in a general way. "I ain't having a City Hall wedding," he said. Ken said that he sees himself marrying on a tropical beach, like the eponymous star of the sitcom "Martin," who tied the knot with his girlfriend, Gina, amid exotic flowers, crashing waves and a cellist in black tie.

His idealization of the wedding extends to the marriage. The sociologist Kathryn Edin argues that poor, unmarried couples often conceive marriage as an especially exalted state -- relationship perfection -- rather than as the acceptably imperfect structure in which daily living occurs. That's certainly how Ken described it. "Once you get married, that means she's everything in a woman you're looking for and you're everything in a man she's looking for," he said. Jewell said much the same: "It's just you and that person, become one." A marriage, therefore, carries intimidating risks, none greater than the risk of your partner cheating. "Oh, yes, yes, yes," Ken said. "If you're married, and she goes out there and cheats on you, that's like the worst thing in the world! 'Cause you said those wedding vows. When you get married, you say you got an inseparable bond. So if she goes out there and cheats on you, she's breaking laws and policies!"

My own time in the inner city leaves me with some sympathy for what the Bush plan is trying to achieve. Inner-city kids want and need dads, and while marriage is no panacea (Ken's parents were married), stable marriages are the surest way to provide them. Expanding economic opportunity is clearly a big part of the solution, but probably not the answer in whole, given the hurdles to fatherhood and marriage posed by community norms. Wanting to marry only when you can do it on a tropical beach is like wanting to work

only when you can start at \$100,000 a year -- that is, not to want it in any meaningful sense. Even as teenagers, Jewell's and Angie's kids talk of wanting kids someday, but dismiss marriage out of hand. "That'd be too plain -- like you'd have to see the same woman every day," Jewell's son Tremmell said. Angie's son DeVon, who is 16, said, "I need some little me's"- children. But, he added, "I just can't see myself being with one woman." One lesson of the 90's -- from the declines in smoking and teenage pregnancy to the plunging welfare rolls -- is that cultural signals matter, so even public-education campaigns aren't to be dismissed out of hand.

On the other hand, if the Bush plan ends up emphasizing exhortation alone -- as opposed to tying marriage promotion to the other services poor men need -- it is likely to alienate the allies it needs to give a cultural campaign its heft and limit its effectiveness. (Perhaps Ken would be more likely to marry if he were making twice as much laying bricks.) The truth is that no one really knows how to help poor men become better fathers and husbands. The debate is in its embryonic stage, as the debate about poor women was 20 years ago. It took a succession of efforts, most of them failures, before welfare-to-work programs started to work. Why not let 1,000 flowers bloom, or at least a good half-dozen, and rigorously test them -- marriage versus Marriage Plus, counseling versus training? While the discussion sometimes sounds fractious, the real news is that it is fractious mostly over tactics, with both sides generally agreeing on the importance of fathers -- in contrast to, say, 1992, when Dan Quayle was ridiculed for criticizing television's single mother, Murphy Brown. From the perspective of children wanting a dad, that much, at least, spells progress.

Too restless to sleep at 1 a.m., Jewell is pattering around the kitchen, modeling the designer purse Ken gave her for Mother's Day. His mistrust of marriage coexists with an outsize romantic streak. "This one took the cake," Jewell says. "But I ain't gonna say that took the cake, because the necklace took the cake, the bracelet took the cake. I don't talk about it at work, 'cause the majority of the women at work -- I ain't gonna say all of them -- their men are alcoholics."

"See, that's another reason they don't take care of their kids," Ken says.

Jewell continues her tribute to Ken's gift-giving feats. Her 30th birthday brought a three-day celebration (Friday, new coffee tables; Saturday, roses; Sunday, the cake). On her 32nd, he sent her to the trunk to get his wallet, and a flotilla of balloons sailed away, revealing the cake beneath. Once when they were having a fight, Ken came in after midnight and placed a candy-filled bag on the dresser. A minute later, Jewell heard a cellphone ring. Half asleep, she wondered if it was a woman calling Ken, only to figure out that Ken had buried a gold cellphone for her in the bag. "I just jumped up and hugged him," she says. This past birthday, Jewell's 35th, she awoke to a list of questions whose answers directed her to a beauty shop. "Ken had already been there," she says. "He paid for me to get my hair done, and he had some balloons and a teddy bear. And there was a note on the teddy bear, leading me to my next destination, a nail shop." And from there, to dinner.

"I had Terrell and Tremmell bake a cake," Ken says. "I had it going."

Normally reticent, Jewell grows voluble with the thought of Ken's distinctive style. "Maybe that's why we can't get married," she says, figuring that Ken would need to outdo himself. "To me, we could go to City Hall. But I do remember, once upon a time, he told me he wanted a wedding like Martin and Gina had." The wedding talk silences Ken. "Long wedding dress, all that stuff don't fascinate me," Jewell goes on. "As long as I got the husband and the ring, I'm straight." By now she is talking to herself. Ken is staring at his cellphone, playing a video game.

The next day, her imagination is still in gear. "Tupac," she says, making breakfast. "Best rapper ever. That was supposed to be my husband right there. Then I was like, 'I ain't even gonna marry Tupac, 'cause I got Ken.' Now Ken won't marry me."

"Cause a your attitude, right there," Ken says.

The thought -- her in a club, parrying Tupac's pleas -- leaves Jewell tickled. "He was, like: 'I don't want you to leave. I'll marry you, take care of your kids,'" she says. "And I was like: 'No, it ain't even like that. I got a man at home I really care about, who's in my corner -- I can't do him like that.'"

"I'm going to have to tell you what happen with me and Janet Jackson," Ken says.

"Janet Jackson don't cook," Jewell says, serving up rice and eggs.

Despite a day of Jewell's creative lobbying, Ken arrives at work at 4 p.m. no closer to matrimony. He's wondering why Jewell ran an errand that morning so nicely dressed. "It could just be me," he says. "But it didn't look right." The job's got him annoyed, too. He thinks the boss is giving other drivers better deliveries. His boss, Wayne Molas, had paid him a compliment -- "fun to be with, not too much attitude" - - but Ken says he's mostly just learned to complain out of earshot. "I do some complaining," he says. Heading off to deliver two pizzas, he puts in a disc of the Killa G's and listens to himself rap.

I see shorties every day
Tryin' to earn they wealth
How could I tell 'em not to
sell drugs
When I sell 'em myself.

How would he feel if Kevion sold drugs? "I'd kill him," he says. What if he settled for becoming a rapper? "That would mean he'd be out in the streets," Ken says. "I'd prefer him to have something uplifting, not down and degrading like his daddy."

His first stop brings a 9 cent tip. The second brings four hard guys standing on the curb, looking like anything but big tippers. "Doesn't look good for the home team," Ken says, before exchanging a pizza for cold stares and 7 cents. "Gaaaad, they handling me rough!" he says. "Guess it's gonna be one of those days."

There are lots of those days in Ken's life, days when the problems seem insurmountable -- the gnawing suspicions, the tensions with Terrell, the dangling side mirror and the 7 cent tips, all competing with a sense that he ought to be in the Caribbean, wearing black tie. And there are days when his life as a pizza man seems a triumph of the first order. He is out of prison. He is not selling drugs. He is raising his son.

After his last pizza run, Ken gets home close to midnight, knocks on Terrell's door and offers an olive branch. "I just told him we gotta sit down and talk," Ken says. "I said, 'Look at me like I'm one of your folks, one of your G's.' I said, 'I wanna know what's on your mind, and I'm gonna tell you what's going on in my mind.'" From Terrell, he gets a noncommittal -- or was it a dismissive? -- "Ay-aight." The talk remains to be scheduled.

Then Ken comes downstairs to polish one of his raps. Most of them are too violent or obscene for print. But one has a chorus that's somewhere between a lullaby and a hymn. He wrote it out of gratitude for Kevion. "Penny for your thoughts," it begins.

Nickel make you tickle,
Dime for your time,
Quarter for the water,

And you pray to the Lord
up above.

"I'm just so happy to have my son," Ken says. "This is my creation. This is what I made. And I get to watch him growing from nothing into something." BET is booming with rappers again. Kevion is an accomplished dancer who hops like a pogo stick. Father and son start to dance, laughing and jumping and shaking the room.

Jason DeParle, a senior writer for The Times, wrote extensively about poverty and welfare for the magazine in the 90's. His book, "American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids and a Nation's Drive to End Welfare," from which this article is adapted, will be published next month by Viking. For more on the book, see www.jasondeparle.com.

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