

Empowering Parents

Denise Bristol Gordon loves motivating parents to become involved in their children's educations. But more important than that, she tells them, is that they learn to trust in the Lord.

As a child, Denise Bristol Gordon discovered her first audience in the backyard of her childhood home.

It was there she would talk to the swaying coconut trees under the clear skies of Guyana. "My mother would say, 'Speak to the coconut trees.' And when I spoke, they would begin waving," Denise said, recalling that when the wind blew, the clanking of the coconuts sounded like clapping hands to the ears of a child.

Recognizing her daughter's gift to speak, Denise's mother provided more than a playground for the then-precocious 5-year-old. Instead, she offered a platform that would serve as the foundation for Denise's future role as motivational speaker.

As Denise's mother prepared her to use her gift for speaking, God had his own plan—one that enveloped one of the largest public school districts in the nation.

Today Denise acts as a liaison between the New York City Department of Education and the parents of its students. She passionately pushes a message of parental involvement—encouraging parents to become active in their children's educations.

But when she speaks, her audiences receive more than a one-dimensional message about education. When Denise speaks, her life reveals a message of hope and healing through Jesus Christ.

FROM HEARTACHE TO HOPE

"I was angry at God as a child, very angry at God," said Denise, recalling the day her carefree world capsized into one filled with chaos. She was no longer gleefully speaking to the coconut trees in her backyard. She was, at just 7 years old, asking God why—why was her mommy not coming home?

She recalled—vividly—the day her world changed forever. Just days before Christmas, her mother was rushed to the hospital after her gallbladder ruptured. Moments later, she died.

"I had never gone to a funeral before, so when they told me she was coming back, I was the happiest person in the world," Denise said, explaining that in Guyana it is customary to bring a deceased person's body back to the family's home before burial.

"Everyone started to cry, and I was happy because I knew Mommy was going to come back. I went over to try and wake her up, and she would not wake up," she said. "Every Christmas from then on was the worst experience of my life because people were celebrating the birth of Jesus as I was celebrating being the youngest of 13 and not having a mother. My life was just turmoil after that."

And though that event shook her world, it also shaped her faith.

After her mother's death, Denise moved to New York City with her father and her siblings. And by the age of 12, Denise's anger had been quieted by the comfort she found within God's Word. Instead of asking why, Denise decided that if God were a father to the fatherless, then He would indeed be a mother to the motherless.

Denise devoured the Word of God as a young girl and decided to set herself apart. "Many people had boyfriends and many people would call themselves Christians but would live a lifestyle that was different," she explained. "For me, I was in the

Word. I literally had to trust God for who He was, for what He said He would do.”

And because she could no longer watch her own mother, she studied the women in the Bible and watched the stories of their lives unfold before her eyes. “I never really had friends, so I made the Old Testament my friend,” she said.

Denise asked God to fill the emptiness in a way that only a mother could—down to the last detail. “My Christianity was real. It wasn’t something that I played with.”

A MOTHER’S HEART

As far back as she can remember, Denise wanted to do two things with her life: She wanted to be a speaker, and she wanted to be a mother—the kind of mother that she had experienced every day for seven years. “My mom was a born-again believer, a stay-at-home mom,” she explained. “Basically, we heard the Word and that was what we lived by. I learned about the rapture before I was 5 years old.”

After four years of marriage, Denise’s dream of being a mother was almost realized when—again—she experienced a painful loss. Following a miscarriage, doctors predicted Denise would never again conceive.

And again, she trusted God.

Six months later, she conceived a daughter, the first of her three children. Eventually, her passion for children catapulted her into a position as the executive vice president of the United Parents Association of New York City, a federally funded program that has since closed its doors.

But as she fought to better the lives of children everywhere, Denise got a phone call that would devastate her world. She was vacationing in Florida with her children when her husband of 19 years called. His message was brief, yet devastating: He was leaving her.

"He told me that we were going to lose the house, that I needed to be back in two days because they were going to foreclose on the house and all of our things would be going into storage," she said. "I didn't tell my children we were going to be evicted, that we were going to be homeless."

"What I did say to them was, 'Remember when God told Abraham to pack up everything and He was going to take him to a new place?' And so I packed them up and I sent them to my sister's house and again I cried out to God."

And again, He answered.

"I called my good friend and she told me that I couldn't come because she was saving money for marriage," she said. With nowhere to turn, Denise found solace in the arms of a local church, Christian Cultural Center of New York.

"When I got to the church, Pastor A.R. Bernard opened his arms to me and he said: 'There is a home here for you, there is a family here for you. We will feed you, we will clothe you, we will do whatever,'" she recalled. "That's what God did for me."

A newly single mom of three children, Denise made a choice. Even when she felt drained, she continued to pour into her children's lives. And that source of strength she drew from God. "With God's grace, I've been able so far to raise my children," she said. "All my children are in the ministry at my church, and they have testimonies of God's goodness. God kept us."

After losing everything she had known for 19 years, Denise understands loss. And when she peers into the eyes of a hurting parent, she understands part of the purpose behind her many losses.

"God allowed me to go through all of that to bring me to a position to where I can see people as people. There's not a

parent, not a mother, not a child that I see that I don't feel I can minister to," she said. "I see parents where they're separated and I'm able to encourage them, to say, 'Put the child first because that child did not ask, did not beg to come into your life.'"

A PLATFORM FOR GOD

Denise refused to be overwhelmed by the consecutive losses she had experienced in her life. And so she decided to give. Where there was loss in her life, she would pour into another's life. For Denise, that meant pouring—more passionately than ever—into the lives of her own children and the children in her community.

After the United Parents Association closed its doors, Denise discovered an avenue that allowed her to pursue two of her passions: children and speaking. And it has become a role that allows her to keep her No. 1 passion—Jesus Christ—a priority.

Employed by the city of New York, Denise works to maintain a relationship between the public school system and its students' parents, overseeing 240 public schools with more than 240,000 students.

She speaks to a slew of organizations including the teachers' union, homeless shelters, churches and schools. "My main message is parental involvement; they need to be involved in their children's lives," she said.

But her message does not stop there. "I would say: 'Ladies and Gentleman, I was married to a beautiful person and things went haywire. He decided he was going to leave. My marriage became a mess. But let me tell you that there are times when I felt that I couldn't go on had it not been for Christ,'" she said. "And by then, you've got about 50-75 people clapping."

"On the secular part, I'm able as a born-again believer to go into many schools, many conferences that are not Christian," Denise added. "I don't have to yell, I don't have to use slang

language. I can talk to parents about the importance of being their children's first educators, about depositing into their children's lives." When she speaks to parents, Denise talks about the banking system, depositing good things into their children's lives.

Hers is a message that needs to permeate the church world as well as the secular one. "We're all going to be rewarded for the way we raise our children, so my message is not only to the secular world, but I think there's a greater need to go to the Christian world," she explained. "We bring our children to church and we put them in a separate room and we tell them they can play and I think that it's wrong. Why not have our children sit in church and open the Word of God?

"We need to stop playing games with our children," she added. "They will see right through us. Let's make God so real to our children that godliness demands a lifestyle."

Denise knows that one voice can save many. And she will tell you that it is not her voice alone that is changing lives; it is her ability to hear God's voice and her willingness to follow it. She also understands that God has handed her a platform—one that she is using to transform lives that mirror her own past.

The little girl who once spent countless hours speaking to the coconut trees of Guyana has transformed into a woman who spends countless hours speaking to and motivating a myriad of crowds across New York City. And when the crowd claps, she smiles because she knows that they are not clapping for her; instead they are clapping for a God who—for one little girl—became a mother when there was none.

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