

# Organization Helps Rebuild Families, Communities

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Marvin Charles of Divine Alternatives for DADS Services (DADS). Photo/Aaron Allen

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*Special to The Medium*

After serving four years in prison on drug-related charges, William Haynes was lucky to find employment as a sheet metal worker.

At 34, the father of five children had never held a job and it felt good to be earning his own money for the first time.

But what Haynes didn't know is that child support obligations, which he said he never knew about, had been accruing even while he was incarcerated. By the time he was released from prison in 2001, he owed \$133,000.

And after two months or so into the job, the state had started to garnish his pay.

"They were taking practically all the money I was making," Haynes said. "I was left with maybe \$75 a week. I felt like I was paying a note to a house I would never live in."

It was around that time that Haynes met Marvin Charles, a Seattle man who had traveled a similar path in life.

Charles and his wife, Jeanett, took what they learned working with guys like Haynes as well as working to win their own children back from the state to create an organization that helps fathers – and a few mothers, too — navigate the murky bureaucracy around child support and parenting.

Their faith-based non-profit, [Divine Alternatives for DADS Services](#), or DADS, is built around the belief that fathers are the cornerstone of a healthy family.

Fatherlessness in this country, they say, is at the root of \$100 billion in annual costs to the federal government.

“It’s the true breakdown of the family,” Jeanett said. “Generation on top of generation — grandmothers, and aunties raising kids without a father present.”

From its offices along Rainier Avenue, DADS provides services around child support and parenting and offers counseling and education aimed at empowering men to become more responsible and accountable fathers.

“There’s not a man in this country who doesn’t want to be his children’s hero,” Marvin told a Congressional subcommittee earlier this year.

Back in 2001, the couple had worked alongside Haynes as he tried to get the state to modify his child support payments to fit his budget. He even eventually got the \$133,000 he owed whittled down to a more manageable \$11,000.

On top of that, Haynes, now 49 and married, created a parenting plan that allowed him to be a father to his children, including a reunion with his twins, a boy and girl, who had been adopted and taken out of state while he was in prison. Two of his kids are now in college, another is in the U.S. Marine Corp. Forces Reserve and the other two are raising families of their own.

“Marvin and Jeanett take a holistic approach, helping you confront the issues that caused you to be in trouble or away from your kids in the first place,” said Haynes.

“They make it so a person can stand on their feet and be supportive of themselves and their kids,” he continued. “They don’t just talk about it, they model it as well.”

### ***The beginning of DADS***

In telling the story of DADS, Marvin often begins by telling the story of his own little girl. Overwhelmed by drug use, he and Jeanett had been incapable of caring for their newborn daughter. So in 1998, when the baby was only months old, Marvin had taken her down to a local hospital, intending to leave her there on the steps.

But he couldn’t bring himself to abandon the child and had instead taken her to a women’s shelter, which directed him to Child Protective Services. The state at the time had custody of four of his other children and had been searching for him.

He and Jeanett had been in and out of rehab, struggling to remain clean. And when a CPS worker suggested marriage as a way to prevent termination of their parental rights, Marvin asked Jeanett to marry him.

“When I stop and look back, I realize I was doing to my children what had been done to me,” he said. “I had been raised in the foster care system. I had to stay in this fight.”

That year, the couple’s improbable marriage launched them on a long, difficult path to rebuild not just their own troubled lives, but to bring together their scattered brood, which at the time included seven children.

“No one expected we would be able to do it,” Marvin said.

When the state began garnishing their paychecks to cover back child support, Jeanett began working to modify the withdrawals in order to relieve the burden on the family.

It took them three years to get all their children back, earning them the Atlantic Street Center’s Family of the Year award.

Because of all she was doing, Jeanett came to understand the diverse and complicated laws around child support and parenting. And, said Marvin, “We started wondering if we could take what we learned to help those people we got high with, did crime with, did time with.”

### ***Learning by doing***

If Marvin Charles is the face of DADS, he likes to say, his wife is the brain.

Jeanett reaches about 250 new clients a year, the majority of them are formerly incarcerated men who learn about the program from other fathers or probation officers.

In the beginning, almost all were African American, Marvin said. Now, “Our client base includes Whites, Blacks, Muslims, Christians, Hispanic, Asians... If you were to ask me, that’s the part I am most proud of.”

Most are seeking help with child support payments and increasingly, Jeanett said, they want to develop parenting plans to help establish visitation or gain custody of their children.

She doesn’t do the work for them, but rather uses what she knows to help them navigate the system and become their own advocates.

“Some of these guys have been caught up in the system so long, with no one to help them, by the time they come to us, they have a lot of child support debt,” she said.

She helps them understand the language of the system, which often requires them to unlearn the language of the streets.

“I help them find the open door, use the system they believe is working against them to get to where they need to go,” Jeanett said.

DADS is one of six Division of Child Support (DCS) partners, contracted to provide parental services.

A DCS [analysis](#) of 2,700 DADS cases between 2002 and 2013 found increases in monthly child support payments as well as arrears payment rates by fathers who had worked with DADS. “DADS’ approach is about parental responsibility...and that can have a real positive effect on how folks are supporting their children financially and emotionally,” said Wally McClure, director of DCS.

### ***Unfinished business***

The help Marvin and Jeanett provide their clients isn’t limited to those clients’ parenting roles.

The couple uses their broad network to help the men find jobs and housing or to direct them to educational resources – recognizing these as key for people trying to get their lives on track.

DADS’ Wednesday morning meetings, open to anyone and any topic, have brought local retail executives together with men who have been on Washington’s Most Wanted List.

Marvin wants to expand the organization into Tacoma, where the organization has several clients and dreams of eventually opening offices across the state.

He hopes the men in his program are passing on what they learn about parenting and accountability to the next generation.

“Don’t just look to us to do it,” he said. “We need to go up river and close this flood gate.”

Marvin has had a lifetime of training for what he does, which he explores in his book, *Becoming DADS: A Mission to Restore Absent Fathers*.

In addition to telling his story about a life of drug use and womanizing, the book describes how, as a newborn, he had been removed from the home of his then-14-year-old mother. Although he grew up only streets away from her, 43 years would pass before mother and son would reunite.

In a story filled with one miraculous twist after another, the two were also reunited with Marvin’s biological father. His parents married shortly afterward.

Their story went global – including a visit to Germany and an appearance on television there — about the same time Marvin had gotten married and was working to bring his own children home.

“I got married, became a father and a son all in the same year,” he said.

Their eight children (the youngest is 7) are living and working or in school in Seattle or California.

But Marvin admits it’s not all perfect.

He yearns to repair the relationship with his 27-year-old son, his namesake, whom he said he “took from one crack house to another.”

“He’s still angry with me,” Marvin said.

And that baby girl he was about to leave on the hospital steps?

Marvette Charles grew up and became a standout student at Rainier Beach High School, speaking and writing occasionally about the importance of fatherhood.

And last year, her father drove her to college in Oklahoma.