

THE PRESIDENT HAS SEEN
8-6-97

Copied
Read
COS

By
Fyler
Showing to
Niece letter
to RSB - Williams
By

Ter/
Nicole -
Could we?
Thanks
Elena

Actor-Director Focusing on Children

By MARY B. W. TABOR

LOS ANGELES — The President spoke in his State of the Union Message about the nurturing of children from the first days of life. The theme of the National Governors' Association convention in July was early childhood development. It was the subject of a special issue of Newsweek, an ABC-TV special and a series of public-service advertisements showing Dad tenderly holding Baby.

Behind the scenes, orchestrating this collective national visit to the nursery is the actor and director Rob Reiner.

So deep is Mr. Reiner's commitment that he put aside movie making for more than a year to get a national campaign called "I Am Your Child" off the ground. Its message is simple: the crucial groundwork for a person's emotional and intellectual life is laid between birth and age 3, and parents should have access to support services, if they need them, to help their babies develop.

"This is something that I've been thinking about for almost 20 years," Mr. Reiner said recently over lunch at Maple Drive, a Beverly Hills restaurant just steps from his office. "It is something deep in my core."

He and his wife, Michele Singer Reiner, a photographer, said they began thinking about a national campaign in 1994. They were new parents and veterans of psychotherapy, a combination that provoked constant discussion about how their behaviors affected their children, and they found it difficult to find scientific research on the subject.

But they also suggest that their own childhoods were somewhat lacking in the kind of nurturing they now believe is essential.

"I can tell you that both Michele and I have struggled tremendously in our lives," said Mr. Reiner, the son of Carl Reiner, the actor and direc-

tor. "Obviously, we got enough good to outweigh the bad, but I can categorically say that I can trace my struggles, and the difficulties I've had in functioning and fitting in, to early influences."

"You've seen 'When Harry Met Sally'?" he said by way of explanation, referring to his movie in which Billy Crystal plays a man who struggles with the notion of whether men and women can be both lovers and friends. "I rest my case."

At a robust 6 foot 2, Mr. Reiner, 50, has aged gracefully since his "Meathead" days on "All in the Family," his long brown hair ap-

Using a Hollywood power base to make gains in a new arena.

Jrandlebar mustache giving way to a balding pate and salt-and-pepper beard.

His office at Castle Rock Entertainment is classic Hollywood, with leather screening-room chairs and framed posters of his films, among them "A Few Good Men," "This Is Spinal Tap" and "Stand By Me" as well as "When Harry Met Sally."

But the bulk of the paperwork on his desk these days is not screenplays or production schedules. Instead, the telephone messages, photographs and letters are from politicians and foundation heads, doctors and business leaders — the eclectic cast of the "I Am Your Child" campaign.

In less than three years, the Reiners have pushed aside the stereotype of the liberal Hollywood dilet-

tante by mobilizing scores of groups and people interested in children's healthy development and helping them form coalitions. It is a feat that has eluded many health-care workers, political figures and grass-roots organizations.

"I now have a power base and a media base and an ability to reach out to people and get a message across," Mr. Reiner said. "And if I don't use those capabilities to disseminate this information to the public, then, I think, that is negligent."

The Reiners' campaign started in 1994 when they arranged a meeting with Tipper Gore, who they knew had interests in protections for children and mental health issues.

"I just called her up," Mr. Reiner said. "I'd heard she was interested in mental health issues, and I tell you I was just a babe in the woods. I really didn't know who to call or what to do."

Mrs. Gore encouraged the Reiners to pursue the issue. Then, a few months later, they invited a group representing media, political and foundation interests to their home in the Brentwood section of Los Angeles for an afternoon meeting where they could exchange ideas and contacts.

"It started in a very organic way," Mr. Reiner said, smiling over a bowl of asparagus soup.

They became acquainted with Ellen Gilbert, an agent at International Creative Management who had connections in the foundation world, and they came across a 1994 Carnegie Corporation report called "Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children."

The report said that if a child received warm and responsive care in the form of talking, reading and playing, his brain could develop to its full potential. If a child is abused or neglected, the problems can compound over a lifetime.

They attracted the interest of Teresa Heinz, who offered financing from her philanthropy, and several other big name sponsors jumped on board, among them AT&T, which

paid for the public service advertisements; I.B.M., which agreed to pay for a CD-ROM with information for parents; Johnson & Johnson, which produced a parenting video that features Mr. Reiner, and Kaiser Permanente, which is sponsoring a conference for business leaders next year.

The next target was Washington. Just before the 1996 election, Mr. Reiner said, the couple asked to discuss their campaign ideas with President Clinton.

To their surprise, they were granted 15 minutes alone with the President and one of his aides.

"We told him all the things we were interested in," Mr. Reiner recalled. "And he said, 'What do you want me to do?'"

They asked that he make early childhood development a priority for his next term and mention it in his next State of the Union Message. And they asked for a White House conference devoted to the topic.

Barry Toiv, a White House spokesman, said that the President and First Lady had already been planning a conference on children, but that the Reiner meeting "meant the issue and the conference would get a tremendous boost."

"The Reiners brought energy, ideas and an ability to draw more attention to the effort," Mr. Toiv said.

The ball was rolling.

Mr. Reiner's status as a heavy hitting director has clearly been an asset. Who else could get Tom Hanks, Robin Williams, Shaquille O'Neal and Gen. Colin L. Powell and the Clintons to star in the one-hour ABC special to sing "Itsy Bitsy Spider" or read "Good Night Moon"? The special was broadcast on April 28 and will be repeated on Aug. 17.

In the video for parents, Rob Reiner appears talking about how "scary" it is to be a new parent and talks about the need to give children "consistent, predictable, nurturing

THE PRESIDENT HAD JOLLY
8-6-97

The New York Times

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 6, 1997

and enriching experiences."

Next February, "I Am Your Child" and Kaiser Permanente are holding a conference for the business community, to highlight what it can do to help insure a healthy start for children, like offering parenting programs, corporate day care, developing company health plans that promote early childhood development or working with government agencies to develop family resource centers.

Mr. Reiner plans to return to movie making, and has begun working on a film about domestic terrorism. But he said his passion is still for the "I Am Your Child" campaign — named after the Barry Manilow song used as its theme — and has begun talking to television executives about incorporating some of its themes in situation comedies like "Mad About You" and "Friends."

"Movies don't really hold the excitement for me that they used to," Mr. Reiner said, almost quietly. "To be totally honest with you, if I could make a really good living doing this, I would not make films, I would devote the rest of my life to this."

That would be welcome news, said child care advocates who have be-

come part of his coalition.

"It's a very exciting, positive thing that's happening," said Anne S. Arnesen, director of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, a child care advocacy group based in Madison. "I Am Your Child" has "focused attention on something that good mothers and people in the child care business have known for years, but that hasn't been in the public consciousness."

Senator John Kerry, Democrat of Massachusetts, who is married to Ms. Heinz, cites Mr. Reiner as a key endorser of his recent bill that would expand programs for at-risk infants and establish a scholarship fund for child-care workers, among other things.

Perhaps the only irony has been a personal one for the Reiners. With the campaign has come long hours at the office and on the road. That has meant time away from their own two sons, ages 6 and 3.

"Here we are trying to promote children's healthy development and give parents tools for helping develop their children, and that has meant taking time away from our kids," Mr. Reiner said. "It's a constant push and pull."