

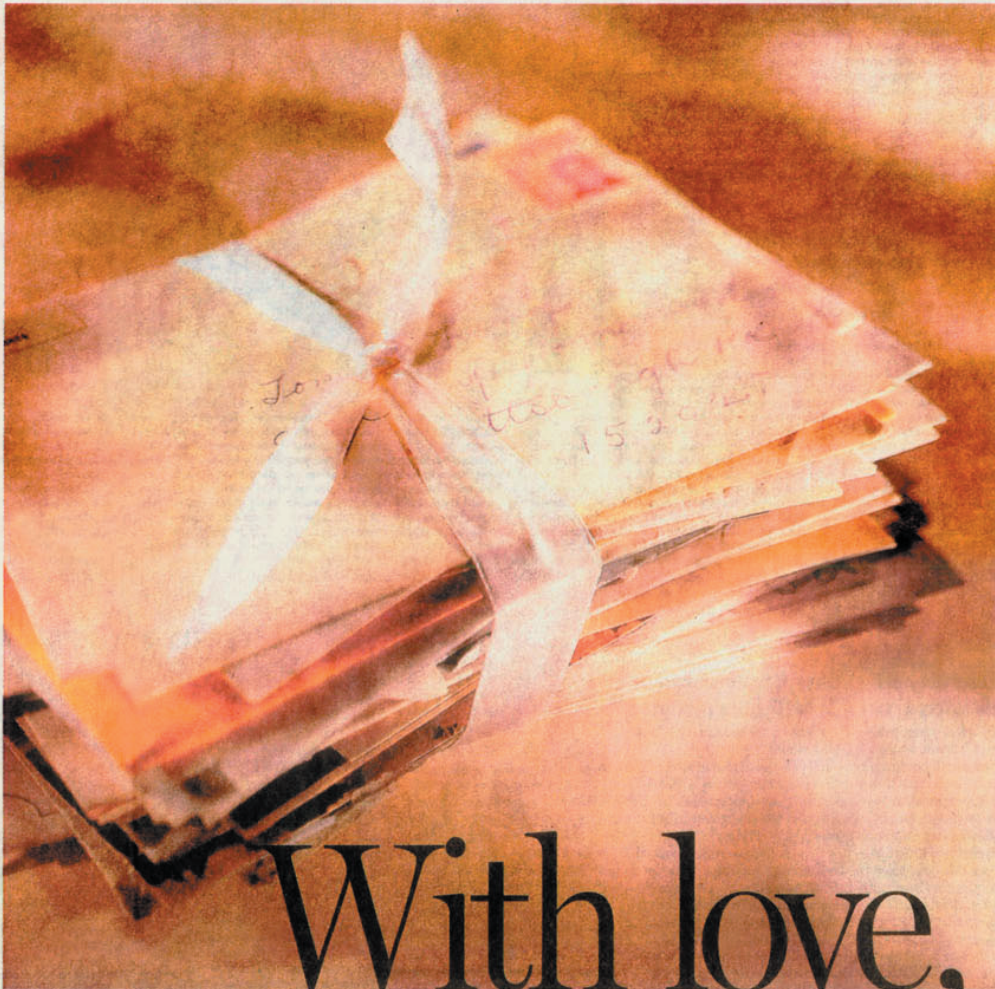
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With love, from Dad

Ministry helps men write 'legacy letters' to their children, wives

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Special Contributor

You don't often see grown men get teary-eyed, but it's a common response when Greg Vaughn asks two questions. "Did your dad ever tell you he loved you?"

And, more poignantly, "What would you give to have had something like that from your dad?"

"Anything," most men reply. "I'd give anything for that."

There's just something about hearing your dad tell you he loves you, Mr. Vaughn says.

Moms are great at giving hugs and putting notes

in lunchboxes, but dads often have a hard time getting their feelings out. What's more, they don't realize the impact their words can have on their kids. But the lack of a dad's blessing can affect a child's self-perception for a lifetime, Mr. Vaughn says.

That's why he's launched a grassroots effort to help dads put feelings to paper by writing a legacy letter to their wives and children. Letters From Dad has grown from a handful of men to legacy groups at churches throughout Dallas-Fort Worth and beyond.

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Letters effort growing in area churches

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Words to remember

Following are excerpts from a final letter to his loved ones by Jim Barnett of Heath, a Letters From Dad participant

To Laurie (his wife):

"You are the best thing that ever happened to me.

You alone know me better than any other human.

You have seen the imperfections in my character, you have lived with my anal retentive 'neat-freak' self for over 10 years and you still love me.

Your unconditional love for me and your commitment to our marriage humbles me.

You have made my life so wonderful and I pray that you know how much I truly love you."

To Kennedy (his daughter, age 6):

"I have never loved anything on earth more than I love you. When I look at you, I see everything that is good in mom and me all rolled into one precious little girl. Your big brown eyes control my very heart. You have taught me so much about how God loves me because

I truly love you unconditionally. You have made me laugh so many times and your hugs are probably what

I'll miss most."

To Jensen

(his son, age 3):

"You are my son and our bond is the closest thing to heaven there ever was.

I am amazed every time I sit back and watch you. Your passion for life is such a blessing to me.

Every time you run to me with a hurt or problem or call my name, I feel like the most important man in the world. I am humbled that

God gave me a son to share life with."

With the June release of his book *Letters From Dad* (Integrity Publishers, \$21.99) and a September interview scheduled on James Dobson's Focus on the Family radio broadcast, the Richardson-based ministry is poised to go national.

For Mr. Vaughn, it's nothing less than the spirit of God moving in the hearts of men, as described in the Book of Malachi: "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers."

"I believe with all my heart that there's a new wind blowing," Mr. Vaughn says. "It's the spirit of reconciliation, to make things right."

Letters From Dad was prompted by Mr. Vaughn's painful memories of his own father.

Earl Vaughn was typical of many baby boomers' fathers. He served in the Air Force during World War II and showed his family he loved them by working hard to provide for them.

"There was no question that he loved me," says Mr. Vaughn, 56. "But he couldn't get the words out, 'I love you. Son, I really am proud of you.' And he just couldn't get his arms around me."

The two never did connect. After his father died of Alzheimer's, Mr. Vaughn had an epiphany. While cleaning out the garage, he found a rusty fishing box, "a rotting mess of useless worms and hooks," and was about to toss it when he realized it was the only thing he had left of his dad.

"I was angry, and frustrated," he said. "What did my dad really think of me? Was I valued? I didn't have my dad's blessing — words that every kid needs to hear."

Then a question shot through his mind, as if God were speaking to him: "Hey big shot, got a question for you. If you were to die today, what would your children hold in their hands tomorrow that would let them know they were the treasures of your life?"

It was ironic, because he remembered reading a best seller, *The Blessing*, by Gary Smalley and John Trent, about the importance of a father's encouragement. He just had never put it into practice.

That book describes a blessing as the "unmerited, unearned and undeserved favor of God." As given by biblical patriarchs, it includes: meaningful touch, a spoken message, giving high value to the individual, picturing a special future for the child and having an active commitment to the child.

Mr. Vaughn wanted each of his seven children to have a more permanent record of his love, so he decided to put his blessing in writing. Not knowing quite how to go about it, he asked a dozen male friends for help.

They began to meet once a month. They practiced writing letters, though it was awkward at first. Mr. Vaughn remembers prompting them.

"Do you think about your kids?" he'd ask.

"Oh, yeah, all the time," they'd reply.

"Do you think about the things you want to teach them and say to them? Have you put it in writing?"

Their letters would have just two criteria: There would be no



Greg Vaughn of Richardson began a church program to help fathers learn to write messages of love for their families.

criticism or instruction ("Men like to fix things," Mr. Vaughn says), and they would be kept to a single page. Grammar wasn't checked, and words didn't have to be poetic.

Using *The Blessing* as a template, the men experimented writing four letters: one to their wives, thanking them for making them a father; one to each of their children; one of thanks to the men's parents; and a final letter to be read upon the dad's death, giving his parting words to his children and expressing hopes for their future.

Carol Fox of McKinney received her letter from husband Mark, 50, during a special dinner date. When the waiter brought their dessert, the whole restaurant staff came along to present her with a beautifully wrapped, huge gift. Inside was a "gorgeous box" with a rose tied to the top.

"I was beyond myself. It was as if no one else in the restaurant existed," Mrs. Fox said.

"To have him do something so special, so out of the ordinary, was breathtaking. I could see he had taken a lot of time to get it from heart and head to paper. There's nothing that can take that away. He went another level for me."

The response from their families was so overwhelming it spread by word of mouth. The original dozen men each began leading groups of 25, 50 and 100 men.

"It's a big 'aha!' Once they understand how important it is, they do it. And they hit it out of the ballpark," Mr. Vaughn said.

Jim Barnett, 39, of Heath, was part of the second wave of groups. Writing the final letter of his life was "an extremely sobering and emotional experience," he said. He wrote it when he was 38 and in perfect health, but it helped him realize — like George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life* — the value of his own life to his wife, Laurie, and their children, Kennedy, 6, and Jensen, 3.

"Even though I tell my kids I love them every single day, they are too young to understand how deep my love for them is. The written words will stay with them long after I am gone," Mr. Barnett said.

A year into it, Mr. Vaughn realized he needed a curriculum that legacy groups could use on their own. With his 30 years' experience as a Christian filmmaker, marketing character-based videos for 85,000 churches and 40,000 public schools, he began to pro-

duce video training materials.

Reg Grant, a creative writing professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, teaches writing on the videos. He says many men don't know how to write anything beyond a business letter.

"There is a writer down inside each dad, someone who wants to communicate but has been frustrated in the past or has never explored the impact of encouraging words," Dr. Grant said.

Letters From Dad began training church leaders three months ago. Churches pay \$595 to have two men trained. They receive all the materials and DVD, and are listed on the Web site.

Individuals pay \$95 for Mr. Vaughn's book, a realm of fine stationery, a leather-bound binder to store copies of their letters, a packet of devotional and instructional material, and a set of sample letters. For \$50 more, men can order an engraved mahogany box as a keepsake for their wives or children to store their letters.

More than 50 churches — mostly nondenominational and Baptist, the stuff of Promise Keepers events — and nearly 1,000 individuals have participated.

But if Promise Keepers' Super Bowl fervor is a booster shot, Letters From Dad is a daily vitamin. One participant told Mr. Vaughn that he could now connect the dots "between the bright lights of the stadium and what to do when I drove up in the driveway."

Legacy groups meet for four weeks and give men the chance to practice writing letters and reading them to one another.

"It's a really interesting thing to see a grown man cry. It really gets to a man's heart," Mr. Vaughn said.

More than 200 men have signed on for a training session Aug. 16 at McKinney Fellowship Bible Church, where Mr. Vaughn is a member. Pastor Bruce Miller is a staunch supporter. He gave a letter to his son, 14, during a recent backpacking trip to Colorado. "He was quiet, but I could see the impact in his face. Later, I saw him pull out the letter and he was reading it by the campfire," Mr. Miller says.

Mr. Vaughn says he is surprised at those who show up for training.

"I thought it would be a bunch of AARP men, but every semester it gets younger and younger," he said, adding that some single moms have joined legacy groups, too.

Thirty months into it, Mr. Vaughn has now written scores of letters to his children. They are powerful, he said, because they reflect how a Heavenly Father communicates.

"God didn't text message or e-mail us. He wrote it in a letter."

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For more information on Letters from Dad, call 1-800-527-4014 or visit www.lettersfromdad.com

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