

# A Convergence of Light

Jerry Milner & David Kelly



The buzz was palpable blocks from the theater as people streamed down the street. Not an uncommon phenomenon outside concert halls and stadiums. But this time was different. Why? Strikingly, it was 7:30 am on a cold, windswept Wednesday morning.

The venue—the historic Maryland Theater—whose stage has seen some of world’s best musicians.

The draw?

Training.

For ten years, Bester Community of Hope, a San Mar initiative in Hagerstown, Maryland, has put on a community training day. This year’s event

brought out close to 600 people who have been involved in Bester Community of Hope in one way or another. Families, teachers, counselors, an array of community organizations, business owners, you name them and they were probably there. Happy, eager and engaged—despite the time of day and unwelcome weather.

Why a community training day? According to San Mar CEO Keith Fanjoy, “For effective solutions and collective impact, we must build safety, trust, and solutions, in that order. If we’re going to do hard things, we’ll have to find a way forward together in a divisive society. This means finding where our interests align and where we have common ground for and with children and families.”

As we entered the theater, the energy only increased, and warmth was everywhere in greetings and hugs. It had the feeling of an enormous reunion of people genuinely happy to see or meet one another. It was apparent quickly that this was far more than a learning or networking opportunity. It was a living demonstration of the power of community, connection, and relationships.

It was aptly titled, “Common Ground.”

The event was hosted, as it has been for the last eleven years, by San Mar, a historically traditional child welfare agency that has embraced a dramatically different purpose and path. In 2013, San Mar took the lead to reach out to key partners to form alliances to build a Community of Hope, a place where people share a vision of safety and success for every child who lives there. It’s a place where public and private organizations, nonprofits, philanthropies, government, businesses, and communities collaborate closely to help achieve that vision.

Bester Community of Hope was originally part of a cohort supported by Casey Family Programs. It continues today with the support of diverse philanthropic partners and a strong partnership with the Washington County Department of Social Services. It has continuously evolved to meet the ever-changing needs of families and neighborhoods in the South End of Hagerstown. Their anchor work continues to be family designed in-home wraparound support funded through the Maryland Department of Human Services, and significant emerging community development investments and safety net infrastructure through the ENOUGH Act from Governor Wes Moore (<https://goc.maryland.gov/Pages/enough-initiative.aspx>).

Fanjoy opened the day by revisiting the journey the community has been on for over a decade now, reflecting that it was only made possible through collective action and partnership. He recognized the much-loved former administrator of the Bester Elementary School, who listened to his pitch to build a community of hope, signed on without hesitation and never looked back. It was a celebration of persistence, togetherness and what a community can make possible together.

The agenda included presentations from three national leaders. Dr. Bruce Perry, Dr. Mona Hanna, and civil rights leader and musician Darryl Davis. All are leaders who know something about the importance of relational health, connecting with people, supporting families, and finding

common ground. Real people who show up with humility and relatability despite the remarkable contributions they are making to improve life in our country.

It was a convergence of light.

Neuroscience, as it supports infant and maternal health, is yielding head turning results and calls us to see our shared humanity. Knowledge of brain development can help us understand and take better care of each other and positions children and families to reach their best potential and dreams. This empirical and human evidence, coupled with plain common sense, can lead our efforts to redraw our work with children and families and create a more just society.

The component pieces are elegant in their simplicity. Provide all mothers with assistance, recognize that strong and healthy relationships are central to all aspects of our health and well-being from infancy through old age, and treat one another with basic dignity and respect. Organizing around these goals creates experiences and outcomes dramatically different from what we have now.

“There is a profound relationship between the social milieu we create and the health and wellness we experience in every domain. That is, every single part of us is influenced by our relationships,” according to Dr. Bruce Perry, MD, Ph.D., in setting the stage for discussing the power of community and human relationships. His books, *What Happened to You?* and *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog*, have been instrumental in guiding our thinking about keeping children healthy and working with children and families.

Dr. Perry noted that

**we are raising our children in relational poverty with only a fraction of the relationships that they need.**

In earlier times in our society, caregiver ratios for children were 4 to 1. Now they are more like 1 to 4, translating to providing about one-sixteenth of what children need. Perry noted that all the “caretaker” relationships do not have to be related adult caregivers but can include siblings and others who are integral to a child’s well-being and sense of belonging.

In contrast, we believe that the current foster care

system further reduces the essential caregiver relationships that children rely upon for healthy development. We do this by limiting or eliminating parent/child contact, delaying initial parent/child contacts while waiting for (often perfunctory) psychological evaluations or drug screens, separating siblings, and accommodating frequent moves while children are in foster care, among other typical practices.

Changing our focus to supporting families, building community, and preserving relationships can change the outcomes for children, not only in the present moment, but for generations to come—and this is justice.

Dr. Perry stressed that connectedness is the key; our history of connectedness is a better predictor of our health than our history of adversity, despite our ongoing attention to adverse childhood experiences. Connectedness determines whether our stress reactions are controlled, moderate, or uncontrolled/not regulated. How parents are able to deal with stress is passed along to children which, in turn, affects their long-term ability to react to stress. Interestingly, the things that parents stress about most often—income, housing, health care, relationships and others—all come from community. This is why we must focus on building and strengthening community.

The justice theme was carried further in Dr. Mona Hanna's discussion of mitigating the crisis of the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. Dr. Mona Hanna, MD, is credited with having uncovered the Flint water crisis in the face of ongoing government reassurances that everything was OK. She persisted in exposing the health crisis presented by the lead-contaminated water and forcing change that would dramatically impact the long-term health and well-being of children and their families in Flint.

Her message of fighting back against injustice in the face of resistance to change is a playbook in advocating for those who often do not have the voice or influence to achieve needed changes in established societal structures. Her struggles in uncovering the crisis and pressing forward for major changes are chronicled in her book, *What the Eyes Don't See: A Story of Crisis, Resistance, and Hope in an American City* (Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, 2018).

### **"You can do big, hard things!"**

according to Dr. Mona, and we don't have to be OK with how things are. Her outreach efforts led to finding partners in unexpected places who also

wanted the right things for children and families in their community.

Dr. Mona's efforts have more recently been channeled into the RxKids program which began in Flint and is now expanding to other locations in Michigan and in other states. It is likely now the largest anti-poverty program in the country. It is showing that providing cash assistance to families during the times of their lives when both parent/child relationships are the most important and when the family is most likely to experience poverty can lead directly to increased well-being and reduced child welfare involvement.

Successfully implementing RxKids has gone to the heart of the most prominent barriers to supporting families in this way—prevailing values that resist helping families financially. She has addressed those values by correctly framing RxKids as a health care program, pro-family, pro-life, and a cost savings program. Additionally, it is an economic program since their evaluations show that over 70% of the funds invested in families go to purchasing basic needs and infant supplies from local businesses, dispelling myths that helping families financially supports drug misuse. And, she has the data to back all of that up.

As a result of RxKids, Flint mothers have more trust in government and have more HOPE. Dr. Mona sees herself as writing prescriptions for hope and love. She is re-building social contracts with families, countering a not-so-implicit message to families that poverty is their fault, and dispensing love to mothers and babies.

Taking the values focus in bringing people together even further, Daryl Davis, an American R&B and blues musician and activist, has fought racism by engaging members of the Ku Klux Klan and has convinced hundreds of Klansmen and members of other hate groups to denounce their membership. Davis runs a podcast called *Changing Minds*, and has stressed that using 5 core values in our work with other people can indeed change minds:

All of us want:

- To be loved
- To be respected
- To be heard
- To be treated fairly and honestly, and
- The same things for their families as we all want for our families.

Davis, a Black man, met and befriended the Imperial Wizard of the KKK, using these simple values. He found that many Klansmen disliked Black people because of misperceptions learned early



in their lives. By allowing them the opportunity to be heard, to be respected, and to be treated fairly and honestly, he was able to counter those misperceptions and, ultimately, persuade many of them to leave the Klan. His experiences are recounted in his book *Klan-destine Relationships: A Black Man's Odyssey in the Ku Klux Klan*.

Rather than fearing people that hated others simply for being Black and the risks that posed for him to meet with them and hear them out, he invited conversation. "Every missed conversation is a missed opportunity for reconciliation," is an adage that he lives by to engage with others.

Ultimately, Davis was gifted the robe and hat of the former Imperial Wizard after he left the Klan.

The converging stories of these three influential leaders in their own fields all point to the light that is generated from valuing relationships, respecting people, and building the supporting structures for relationships and respect, namely *community*. Regardless of the specific need to be addressed, a values-based commitment to supporting people and communities can yield tremendous, at times impossible-to-imagine, results. Rigorous evaluation and the results of efforts, such as those

involved with RxKids and the Flint water crisis, can push us forward to take on challenges and barriers that otherwise might feel insurmountable. They also serve as examples of how we can promote health and well-being in much more efficient, effective, and humane ways.

Imagine the inspiration that these lessons in hope, love, and persistence provide to the large community of partners in the Bester Community of Hope initiative. Multiply that exponentially to the possibilities for making child and family support a place of trust, a place without fear, and a place where outcomes are measured in success and togetherness rather than separation and disruption. These opportunities and more are not only possible, but likely when *points of light converge*.

For more information on this event, see *Finding Common Ground for Families*, April 1, 2026. Accessed at: <https://sanmarhope.org/finding-common-ground-for-families/>





