A sister acts as an unlikely mentor to deadbeat dads

Sister Carol Schumer leads a parenting class at the Father’s Support Center in North St. Louis on Tuesday, May 14, 2013, in St. Louis. Photo by Stephanie S. Cordle, scordle@post-dispatch.com

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ST. LOUIS • Sister Carol Schumer always eats everything on her plate, makes her bed every day, wears only white and navy and admits to being a wee bit pushy in her former career as a Catholic school principal.

So there’s no missing this rail-thin woman with gray hair and sensible navy shoes in the center of 18 men who’ve been labeled deadbeat dads.
They are seated around her in a horseshoe in a windowless conference room. Her task is to teach them ways to be engaged dads with their kids — but their differences couldn’t be more marked.

Sister Carol was the second of nine children raised in rural Perryville, Mo. She gave her adult life not to a husband or to small town life, but to the Daughters of Charity 47 years ago. She was 19.

The men are in their 20s through their 50s. Some have dreadlocks, others tattoos. A few wear ties. Some are dandy and handsome, others are sad-eyed and tired. Many have been addicted to alcohol or drugs and done prison time. They are all unemployed. The majority of them owe hundreds, even thousands of dollars in back child support.

That is why most of them are here. The courts have told them to come, or go to jail.

Oddly enough, Sister Carol is one of the first people these men see as they begin a parenting class as part of The Family Formation, a six-week “boot camp” at Father’s Support Center. While the current class is entirely African-American, the program is intended to re-connect fathers of all races and backgrounds with their kids as they go through intensive job preparedness, counseling and other stabilization.

A Catholic sister doling out parenting advice to a group of streetwise men at first seemed ludicrous to the Founder of the Father’s Support Center, Halbert Sullivan.

Sullivan, a man who once served time in federal prison before founding the center in 1997, said he scoffed when Sister Carol pitched him the idea. First, she was a woman — which was far too distracting.

**‘HE NEEDED ME’**

And then there was the sister thing.

“I thought, she’s a white, Catholic nun. Would the men take her seriously? She’s never had a child, and she’s never done real parenting.”

But remember that wee bit of pushiness in Sister Carol?
“He needed me,” she recalled of her pitch. “He was all by himself.”

So 15 years ago, Sullivan agreed to give it a try. Sullivan said he knew Sister Carol was the right fit when the men started calling her for parenting advice — not him. So, what’s the connection here?

First, Sister Carol doesn’t judge.

Instead, she puts out bowls of Tootsie Rolls on the conference tables for them to eat and cheerily rewards them with tiny stickers when they say something meaningful or come back for another meeting.

“I try to model with them what they should do with their kids: Rewarding them, rather than taking away, bringing the candy, and being positive,” she explains afterward.

“Most of them probably won’t remember a lot of what I’ve said in the course, but they’ll remember the relationship and the care and the respect, and that’s where they want to go for their children.”

In a world of hard-knocks, Family Formation attendees are rarely coddled: they are told to own-up to their mistakes, stop making excuses and get their acts together with their kids. They are ordered to “eat some humble pie” to make amends with the estranged moms of their children, who’ve fought them for child support.

But Sister Carol’s parenting class is different. Though she’s never had any children, she’s like the upbeat, positive parent many of them never had.

THE RACE ISSUE

She is the first to tell them that despite their vast differences, they have something deeply in common: the belief that dads – no matter the baggage — have a place with their kids.

And in her first class, she addresses race, straight-up.

“Where I was growing up, African-Americans could not even stay the night. It was very, very racist. That’s my background,” before asking them to point out if she says anything racist, because she doesn’t mean to.

Later they go around the room. She’s asks each dad to name the children they have, the number of mothers, and whether the dad’s have contact
with their children. Most have three children with two moms. Their answers are clinical. But Sister Carol’s responses are not.

One man says he has no contact with one of his three children.

“How sad,” says Sister Carol.

Another says he hasn’t seen one of his children since he had the child in high school.

“How hard,” she says.

Another says it’s not easy with their mother, but he visits his kids.

“Thank goodness you’re seeing them,” she says.

The men taking the class include Durwood Woolridge, 46. He has three grown children, 19, 24 and 26. During a break, Woolridge says he lost about 10 years of his life to depression and homelessness.

‘I WISH I HAD BEEN THERE’

He never knew his father – “never even seen a picture of him,” he says.

He realizes now his kids don’t really know him. The youngest, a college student, wants little to do with him. He’s reconnected with his two older children, including one in prison.

“I wish I had been there to give him more time and support, and to get him out of his issues,” Wooldridge says.

Woolridge stopped his spiral five years ago and graduated from Harris-Stowe State University this spring with a degree in accounting. He came to Father’s Support Center on his own because he knew he could not rebuild his life without reconnecting with his kids.

“I don’t want to take anyone else’s place, but I want to take my place,” he says.

Although repayment of child support is a high priority of the Father’s Support Center program, the welfare of the children is the end-game. Research suggests, boys and girls with meaningful relationships with their dads are more likely to graduate high school and go to college. And
fathers who see their kids, more willingly pay their child support, which keeps kids out of poverty.

Sister Carol said she saw the parenting gap firsthand when she was a elementary school principal at Bishop Healy in north St. Louis, the precursor to Cardinal Ritter College Prep, now in Midtown St. Louis. She said she realized parents were desperate for information about how to parent their kids, and she saw that many mothers were struggling to do it on their own.

When she retired from teaching, she trained in Marilyn Steele’s Effective Black Parenting method, a federally recognized program for families typically in poverty and at risk of abuse.

She then pitched her method to Sullivan.

Eighty-six classes later, Sister Carol is so well-regarded, men from classes years ago still recognize and stop her on the street. Others taking her classes text her for parenting advice.

‘SHE’S GIVIN’ IT’

Though in her outside world she’s been hugged by a man only once, Sister Carol is hugged continually at Father’s Support Center. At graduation, the men’s mothers come and hug her too.

“Sister Carol — she’s givin’ it. She’s not just calling it in,” says participant Jamil Stratton.

But graduation is still weeks away. Sister Carol has lots of parenting work to do. There will be lessons in positive discipline and reflection on their own childhood — most have been hit or abused. But first she needs to break down years of messages from television, the courts and even their children’s mothers in which they’ve been told, they don’t matter, but their money does.

Sister Carol raises her voice and asks them, “What is society telling you about fathers today?”

“Don’t matter,” one mumbles.

Sister Carol answers loudly for them all: “What society is telling you is that the man is not important.”

“What is your job?” she asks back.

“Pay child support,” several say.

“Gentlemen,” she says. “We bought into that lie. Don’t let anybody tell you you’re not important in your child’s life. You are critical. It’s not just your money. It’s your emotional support.”