In 1993, Halbert Sullivan went on a two-week-long cocaine binge, until he passed out and later came to on a bus stop bench in front of Beaumont High School. “I woke up and I said to myself, ‘You must be crazy.’” He was 41 years old. That day was a turning point for Sullivan. Soon after, he checked into a drug rehab center and, a month later, he enrolled in St. Louis Community College, Forest Park. By 1996, he had acquired his bachelor’s degree from Fontbonne University and went on to Washington University where he earned an MSW from the George Warren Brown School of Social Work.

This was no small feat for a man who had developed a serious drug habit going back nearly 20 years and who had served three stints in prison, including two and a half years in the Attica Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison in New York.

The oldest of eight children, Sullivan grew up “very poor,” in a housing project, in Memphis, Tenn. He was raised by his mother, who ran a tight ship, along with a stepfather who was in and out of the picture. When Sullivan was 14, he moved with his family to Rochester, N.Y., where he was first tempted by drugs. “The street had all the action that you wanted to see. These guys (on the street) had money, and I wanted some of that money. And I went the wrong way,” Sullivan said.

Today, Sullivan is CEO of the Fathers’ Support Center on the north side of town. Sullivan was working as a social worker for the St. Louis Public Schools when he was asked by Doris Stoehner and Sue Breslauer to help in their quest to address the issue of absentee fathers and children living in poverty. He was reluctant at first — he liked his job with the schools — but he ultimately accepted the challenge. In 1997, with Sullivan at the helm, the FSC began offering help for fathers financially and emotionally estranged from their children. The nonprofit has an annual budget of $3 million and is supported by private donors and government grants.

Sullivan is 61 and married, going on 20 years. He has four grown children from different stages of his life.

What was the idea behind FSC?
In 1996, ’97, the term “dead-beat dad” was a well-used term. It was during the time that Clinton had signed a bill that changed welfare into TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). And that meant that there would have to be more of a concerted effort in getting fathers to be more financially supportive. The research will support the idea that an involved, engaged father is more likely to be financially supportive of his children. So I built a project that was about how to get him engaged and involved, as a means to get the financial support that the children need.

What is the FSC’s ‘boot camp’ like?
It’s transformational. It’s six weeks, five days a week, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. We’re working...
on job readiness from the beginning. On
staff, we have family therapists, social
workers, parenting specialists and job
development specialists. Aside from being
on time, there's no sagging pants, no long
T-shirts and no hats on in the building.
And there's no compromise. Then there's the
therapeutic groups. You'll see grown men
crying in group. What we want with the
therapeutic process is to help him to begin
to change his perception about himself:
You're not the victim—it's not everybody
else's fault. So, the curriculum: we start out
with values, norms, We also have a GED
class here, and we have a computer lab on
site. Then we have community practicum
where the men volunteer in other
community-based organizations. The
community practicum is a resume-builder.
In six weeks we have a graduation. That's a
self-esteem booster. Some of them have
never completed nothin' in their lives.

How many men participate?
Usually, 400 guys a year. We have four
different locations going. We look at several
different things, but my main goal is father-
child interaction. We graduate 75 percent of
that 400, so around 300 guys. Of that 350,
80 percent of those guys report that they
have weekly interaction with their children.
Of that 350, we get 60 percent of those guys
a job. It fell to 60 percent around '09 or '10,
when the economy bottomed out, but
before then, we would get 80 percent of
those guys a job. Of that 60 percent, 77
percent of the 60 percent keep their job for a
year. And research says if they keep that job
for a year, they're more likely to stay
employed. When you break those numbers
down, you're talking about out of the 400
men, probably 220 will keep their job for a
year or more. And not only do we impact
the child support system—because the
average guy will generate about $3,800 a
year into the child support system. Now he's
paying taxes, and he's not going to jail.

Talk about your past.
Prior to 1993, I had used some type of
drug for almost 20 years. But I got addicted to
crack cocaine. I began using in 1979, and
that's when my entire world was upside
down. I used drugs every day and all day —
I was a dope fiend, I was a corner thug. I
would beg for change to get my drugs. I
lived in vacant buildings (in Rochester). The
first time I went to prison it was for
burlary, and it wasn't necessarily to
support a drug habit; it was to support a
lifestyle. I was a hustler. The second time I
went to prison it, too, was for burlary. And,
again, it was to support a lifestyle. Now, in
these early days, I wasn't even using hard drugs yet — I was smokin'
marijuana. And then the third time I went
to prison, I was about 24 years old, and they
gave me life (in 1975), and that was for
selling drugs— I was a profiteer. I stayed
incarcerated for two and a half years, before
my sentence was reduced (following an
appeal), and I was able to get out in 1977..

Was your biological father in the picture?
From the age of zero to about 54 years old, I'd only seen my biological father twice,
when I was about 12 years old. I do have
memories, during my late teens and
twenties, wondering about this dude. I do
know now that the lack of guidance
probably helped me make the decisions I
made, as far as doing illegal things. After I
got clean from drugs, I did have a yearning
to know him and have him know me. But at
that time I was about 43 years old, and I thought
that was kind of odd. Why did I need that
dude to know me at this age— he ain't done
nothin' for me. I reconnected with him
when I was about 53 or 54 years old. It was
eerie, very eerie, to finally come face-to-face
with this guy — we look just alike.

Are you still in touch with him?
No, he's dead. I was able to get to know him,
and I was able to get to know other family
members from his side.

Are you involved with your own children?
I had fallen out of the life with all of my
children. Around 1979 to 1983, was when
I fell off the planet. I was a stamped-down
crack head. I did not resurface in their lives
until '83 to about '91. I periodically sent
money to them, but it wasn't nothin'
regular and it wasn't nothin' to brag about.
I resurfaced again when I went into drug rehab; when I came out in 1992, I
reintroduced myself, and in 1993 I
had the children to the home here in St.
Peters for a summer vacation. In 1995 I went to visit
them in New York, so things were being
repaired.

You have two other businesses?
The salvage yard (A&S Salvage and
Dismantlers, in Kinloch) belongs to me and
them in New York, so things were being
repaired.

What they say

*Halbert started without a
salary, on a song and a
prayer. We would go on
the street corners in the
projects and give out
hotdogs and potato
chips, trying to recruit
men for the first program.
It never ceases to amaze
me the impact that the program — and Halbert —
have made on thousands of lives in our
community.*

Doris Stoehner, FSC board member

*He’s a really humble,
hard-working guy who
could probably make a
ton of money doing
something else, but this
is his goal and his
mission in life, to see the
family together.*

John Schicker, president
general manager, Schicker Automotive
Group

*He is certainly an
innovator and a risk taker.
He is very committed to
bringing the best out of
our clients for their
children and their
families. He has made
the Center nationally
known, and has spoken all over and received all
kinds of awards.*

Sister Carol Schumer, Daughter of Charity;
parenting specialist, FSC