

There is no shortage of stories in the news media about fatherless homes. Everyday there is a new study detailing the negative impact on larger society on the number of growing families that don't have a male presence in the home. However, little attention is paid to the realities behind the statistics, to the real-life devastation visited upon those whose fathers were never there to teach them the bare necessities of life.

But one family is looking to change this. In their one act play "Out of the Ashes" real-life father and son duo Coley Harris and Ahmarr Melton dive deep into the impact Harris's absence had on both their lives.

When Melton was 2 years old, his father was sent to prison. While they saw each other intermittently over the following years, they didn't fully resume their relationship until 14 years later when Harris was released. To say that their relationship was strained is putting it mildly. No amount of apologizing could remove the pain of a near decade and a half long absence. There were just too many milestones missed along the way. And one of the most impactful lessons that Melton never received was learning how to shave.

He states the profundity of this during the play as he tells the audience, "When you were watching your father shave, I was cutting my throat." In that moment, one is forced to reckon with the image of a sad, lonely boy holding a blade to his throat, without anyone there to guide his hand to safety.

As most of the audience is generally comprised of men and boys who have been in the same predicament, most of them are aware of exactly how that feels. And it is this sense of connectedness that is at the core of the play; the kind of empathy that gives it its power. In that vein, "Out of the Ashes" creates a form of dramatherapy to give their audience the tools necessary to help navigate these difficult relationships.

These are the types of stories that the statics don't show. The tales the news reels don't run. The play highlights the central question that is never asked because the answer is presumed to be an impossibility: "What happens when the fathers come back?"

However, with more than 2 million children in America who have at least one parent in prison, it is a reality that cannot be ignored. It is this question that is the theme of "Out of the Ashes." It is this question that Melton and Harris are using their own family to answer.

For these two, it seems as though the key to success in rebuilding their relationship was patience and consistency. Initially, Melton was understandably reticent to let his father back into his life—particularly at such a tender age. However, Harris rightfully took the lead role in attempting to repair their bond and made a standing weekly date with his son at the park. And it was during these weekly walks that that wall built over 14 years of incarceration began to chip away. And slowly the love that it was shielding began to pour through.

It was also during these walks that the idea for “Out of the Ashes” began to germinate. And on January 3, 2015, “Out of the Ashes” the play premiered to an audience of 240 people. By 2016, a DVD of the play had been released as a resource by the National Fatherhood Initiative to help those throughout the country reintegrate families that had been torn apart by incarceration.

By telling their story publicly, Harris and Melton put faces those suffering under this national crisis. And in their healing were able to offer up what those in their situation want most—the hope of reconciliation.