

## Dr. Robert Putnam at the Bushnell

Dr. Robert Putnam, author of the book *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, gave a talk at the Bushnell in Hartford last Thursday (7/21/16), entitled “Closing the Opportunity Gap”. It was sponsored by the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving and it is very relevant to Asylum Hill. Starting from the premise that “poverty is isolation, obstruction, exclusion,” he asks the question, “Why has the opportunity divide become so large in recent decades?”

Dr. Putnam began with a comparison between two girls the same age, with similar backgrounds from his hometown, Port Clinton OH.

In the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, adults decided that educating all kids in the community would benefit everyone. Kids from rich and poor neighborhoods were considered relatively equal due to attending the new institution - high school. Sometime around the 1980s, parents who chose to go to college started gaining an advantage over those who went to work immediately after high school. Until then, college had simply been a choice. Now, it was becoming a class barrier. When the bottom fell out of industry, those who had been working in factories and as skilled laborers were now seeing fewer opportunities.

Of the two girls, Miriam, granddaughter of Dr. Putnam, was benefitted by the fact that her parents and grandparents had attended college. By contrast, Mary Sue, exactly the same age and born in Port Clinton, started down the slippery slope of unemployment, divorce, loneliness, drugs, and single parenthood, due to her working class parents, who had not attended college.

Since the 1980s, the opportunity divide has gotten wider. One study cited by Dr. Putnam showed that “Goodnight Moon” time (parents reading with their children approximately 45 minutes a day) makes a huge difference in a child’s vocabulary, reading ability, school grades, and most importantly self-confidence and the feeling of being loved. This is very difficult for single parents, especially single mothers, who work long hours simply to pay bills, not leaving enough quality time to spend with children.

Another study showed comparisons in attendance in sports and extra-curricular activities. Pay-to-play was introduced around the 1980s. Paying to participate in these activities took a much higher percentage of income from poorer families, so the dropout rate was also higher in poorer neighborhoods. A sharp divide occurred in participation in sports and extra-curricular activities between kids from rich and poor school districts.

What can be done to reduce the opportunity gap? Dr. Putnam offers a few suggestions: (1) providing high quality early childhood programs for all children, (2) getting excellent teachers into schools in poor neighborhoods, (3) mentoring kids one-on-one to provide stable support from an adult role model, (4) providing navigators to help students get through college and into work.

Parents in the 1920s were faced with a rich-and-poor class divide, political upheaval, and world war, yet they chose, at a town-by-town level, to provide opportunities for all kids, by creating a high school in every district. Yes, taxes were somewhat higher, but helping all children helped the whole of society, and prevented escalating costs down the road. Today, Dr. Putnam asks, what solutions will we think up to see that every child counts?

Dr. Putnam is a Malkin Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University and the winner of many awards in the political sciences and humanities, and has been a consultant to several U.S. Presidents and other global leaders. For more information go to <http://robertdputnam.com>

