



How Heroes Are Raised

The courage of Welles Crowther and Salman Hamdani points to a quiet lesson: Heroism begins long before a crisis, when children learn that their work matters.

By [C.D. Cunningham](#)

FEATURES

September 11, 2026

Before he bravely gave his life helping people escape the World Trade Center, Welles Crowther helped his father clean the fire truck.

Welles' mother remembered him [going to the station on weekends with his father](#). Welles was small enough that he could get to parts of the truck that the adults could not.

So he would come help shine up the truck for parades. The adults gave him meaningful work. And as a teenager, he trained to fight fires.

Welles chose a career in equities trading. But on September 11, 2001, when the South Tower of the World Trade Center, where he worked, was hit, he got to work. He led strangers out of the building and helped the injured down the stairs. He carried one injured woman down several flights of stairs, then ran back upstairs to help others.

He died when the tower collapsed on top of him.

Those he helped rescue remembered that he carried a [red bandanna](#), a habit he learned from his father.

Today marks the 25th anniversary of Welles Crowther's sacrifice, and the sacrifices of hundreds of other heroes like him. His courage still moves me. But perhaps just as important as the hero he would become was that little boy at the firehouse.

A Person of Character

We usually discover heroes at the crucial moment of their heroic action. The danger arrives, they act, and we marvel.

But if we intend to cultivate a culture that can produce heroes, we need to look back further. What happened in the years before that moment? What did these heroes believe about themselves, their responsibilities, and their neighbors?

Who raised these kids, and how did they do it?

Talat Hamdani remembered her son Salman Hamdani as a 12-year-old. He brought sick pigeons home to [nurse them back to health](#). As he grew older, that instinct turned into capability. He was trained as a New York City Police Department cadet, then decided to try to attend medical school. He began work as an EMT while he studied. Salman developed a habit of following up with the patients he brought to the hospital.

Each of these seemingly ordinary moments gives children an opportunity to care for others.

On September 11, he was likely [traveling to work](#) on the elevated No. 7 train when he saw the burning towers. He never reported to work that day. Because he was a Pakistani Muslim, suspicions began to grow after he disappeared that morning. But those who knew him never wondered. Officials identified Salman's body months later. He had gone to the North Tower, and he was found clutching his medical bag.

A Child Who Has Something to Contribute

There is something important about children being given useful jobs among adults. The children can admire the work of the adults. They can discover that their contributions matter, that other people depend on them, and that becoming more capable will allow them to do more good.

The opportunities to do this crop up in ordinary places. A younger sibling needs help finding a shoe. A neighbor could use help carrying groceries inside. The chairs need to be put up after the church social. A grandparent would prefer a longer, more meaningful conversation than a child wants to give.

Our incentives can sometimes interfere with a willingness already present.

Each of these seemingly ordinary moments gives children an opportunity to care for others.

But as parents, we can accidentally ignore or undermine those opportunities.

It is often faster to just do the job ourselves. Teaching a child how to do the dishes is, in my experience, more difficult than doing the dishes by several orders of magnitude.

We may prioritize our children's individual pursuits to a degree that leaves little room for the people and communities that need them. We may not ask a teenager to help us cook dinner for a neighbor recovering from surgery when doing so would upend the entire schedule.

Or we may reach for rewards, giving children an answer to "What's in it for me?" before they even ask, in turn denying children the opportunity simply to serve those around them. In a [small experiment with 20-month-olds](#), children given material rewards for

helping subsequently helped less when rewards stopped than did children who had received praise or no reward. Our incentives can sometimes interfere with a willingness already present.

Heroism and Personal Fulfillment

So, with this in mind, how can we create a family and a culture (or perhaps even a society) that produces self-sacrificing heroes in an environment seemingly obsessed with personal fulfillment at the expense of everything else?

Even when we explain the reasons for sacrifice and service, we can keep the attention on the self. Volunteering can strengthen a college application. Generosity makes us feel better. Church will provide a good social environment. God will reward sacrifice with greater blessings.

These benefits are certainly all real. But often they do not feel worth it when the sacrifice required is extreme. If personal benefit is the reason for every obligation, we have given our children little reason to keep an obligation when it becomes more costly than the expected reward.

Another person's need is itself a sufficient reason to act.

Instead, we can cultivate the belief that another person's need is itself a sufficient reason to act. We can explain to them why the tasks we give them matter, and they can watch us work alongside them. They can observe us keep our commitments when it is no longer in our own narrow self-interest.

Religious life is a particularly rich arena for children to learn this lesson. King Benjamin [teaches](#) that parents should teach children "to love one another, and to serve one another." A congregation gives them [people to practice with](#), including those who are inconvenient. It provides them with a community and obligations they can show up for. And it provides a structure for putting these lessons into practice.

We should expect our service to bring us joy. We should believe that God will bless us for our sacrifice. And we should learn to act for others without making those benefits the reason we act. "What do I get out of it?" cannot be the organizing question of a life that we hope could lead to the kind of heroism displayed by Welles and Salman.

Ordinary Courage

Children need adults in their lives who [model](#) useful service that they can admire. Adults who have learned skills and use them to fulfill their responsibilities and to serve others. Welles had firefighting experience. Salman had medical training. They both had compassion, cultivated by thoughtful, purposeful, and loving [parents](#), that caused them to put those skills to work.

Every single parent reading this article wishes that those two young men had come home that day. And thankfully, most of the service and sacrifice our children and we perform will go quietly, leave no public record, and end with us back with our families.

On this anniversary, we can tell the stories of those who didn't. Then we can turn to our own children and invite them into the work waiting around us, so that they can grow into the same kinds of people.

Long before anyone knew that Welles Crowther was a hero, a boy went with his father to the firehouse, and the men there found a job for him to do.

About the author



C.D. Cunningham

C.D. Cunningham is a founder and editor-at-large of Public Square magazine.