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Fostering Resilience

Nationally recognized healthcare leader Annette M. Walker shares her powerful advice for raising brave, confident children.

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ith a knack for strategic, approachable leadership, Annette M. Walker knows what it takes to get things done—at work and at home. She has decades of experience leading healthcare organizations, but there are two roles that she says are key to most of her achievements: wife and mother.

“Being a mom prepared me for success. To be a great leader, you need the ability to organize people and get them to believe in something, even if that’s just cleaning the house,” says Walker, president of City of Hope Orange County. “I’ve had an amazing career with the opportunity to work for many wonderful organizations and not-for-profits focused on serving the community, and what it’s afforded me is a perspective of purposeful

work that makes a difference for my family and community. I could not have done any of this without the support of my husband, Chuck. The most important decision in life is choosing your partner.”

Walker began her momentous career in health-care as a clinical laboratory scientist and ran a clinical lab for the first 10 years of her career. She was fascinated by the clinical work but recognized she could use her talents for a greater good.

“I realized early in my career that what I truly enjoyed was creating systems that benefited people and using influence and authority to change and improve the workplace,” Walker says.

She’s since spent her career in strategy, building things that have created opportunities for people and communities. A visionary healthcare leader, she was chosen to build a 21st-century comprehensive cancer campus in Orange County for City of Hope, one of the nation’s elite cancer treatment and research organizations. Lennar Foundation Cancer Center at City of Hope Orange County opens in Irvine in 2022.

Raising Resilient Children

“Along the path, I developed a gift for seeing the whole puzzle before having all the pieces,” Walker says. She earned the profound responsibility of caretaking the future of an organization, making sure it was prepared for anything and positioning it to thrive in the future.

“Being a strategist is about problem-solving for anticipated challenges. And with six kids, you’re always ready for anticipated challenges,” she continues, adding it’s also important to prepare for opportunities ahead—and help children create their own.

A mom and guardian to children who span from Gen X to Gen Z, Walker has a distinct perspective. She says she and Chuck have witnessed an evolution in parenting challenges. “It’s unique to have raised four different generations of children. We’ve seen challenges change considerably from our oldest to our youngest,” she says, particularly as kids approach graduation and become overcommitted to sports and top grades in the pursuit of college admission.

That’s why it’s essential to raise brave, resilient children who are prepared to address life, especially in an era when the false reality of social media is so easily within reach, she says.

“Social media convinces us that everyone leads a perfect life. But the truth is, that perfect life we see on social media is just the tip of the iceberg,” Walker shares. “Underneath the waterline, everyone has challenges. Everybody has disappointments. But successful people take a challenge—like a bad test grade—and don’t let it defeat them.”

Instead, Walker recommends helping children build confidence by guiding them to bravely overcome obstacles and learn from the experience. “Our society focuses too much on failure, and the fear of not succeeding discourages kids from trying,” she says. But not trying is a much greater detriment to

happiness and success than learning from failure. “Don’t be afraid. Get out there and do it. When you need to, hold on to your anchors, like faith and family, to keep you from going adrift.”

Leading By Example

Walker says guiding kids to make good choices starts at home. No one sets a better example than parents themselves, and accountability is the foundation behind building good character and values.

“We love our kids like crazy but don’t do them any favors by not holding them accountable because that can set them up for disappointment from the rest of the world that will,” Walker says. “That goes beyond just teaching right from wrong but instilling empathy and a responsibility for others.

“Children are so smart,” she continues. “As parents, we’re their most influential role models. They mirror how we behave. If we want our children to be good citizens, we have to set a strong example and model the behavior we expect from our kids.”

In a world full of negative influences, parents should also look to build a support system throughout their school systems and community.

“When children are young, we manage who they interact with. But each time they enter a different phase of school—from kindergarten to high school—we lose more control as parents,” she says. “The more intentional you are, particularly in the early years, the easier it becomes to create the community you want for your children. As they get older, they start making those good choices on their own.”

With 13 grandchildren, that’s an experience she and Chuck have proudly witnessed firsthand. Many grandparents claim their proudest moment as the day their first grandchild was born. But for the Walkers, the most rewarding part has been seeing their children become parents.

“Our happiest moments are seeing our children with their children. We’ve gotten so much pleasure out of watching them grow into loving parents of safe, confident, happy children,” she says. “It’s so gratifying watching the lessons we instilled in their heads and hearts shape them into wonderful parents.”

As their family continues to grow, so does the love and chaos behind every family photo, and the Walkers wouldn’t have it any other way. “We are so blessed to have had this wonderful family and tremendous opportunities,” she says, adding the same skills that help parents manage busy households also make them strong business leaders.

“Architecting dinner for eight people every night is a feat in and of itself,” Walker laughs. “But being a parent takes organizational skills and financial management, and it also involves envisioning your children’s future—much like business leaders envision the future of their organization.

“Parents have the wisdom to see and predict things before they happen,” she adds.



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