

Of princesses and first ladies

By Roland C. Warren
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Disney's latest animated film, "The Princess and the Frog," will be released Friday. The film already has received a great deal of attention largely because it features Disney's first-ever black princess, Tiana.

After screening "The Princess and the Frog" and reflecting on its significance, I was reminded of something I am fond of saying and truly believe: "A good father helps his daughter find her prince without kissing all the frogs."

Indeed, James, the father of Disney's new princess, is presented in the film as the driving force behind the values and character that allow the rags-to-riches princess to live by her principles, achieve her dreams and find her prince.

James, voiced by Terrence Howard, works hard every day to support his family. He and his wife (voiced by Oprah Winfrey) work together to encourage their daughter to dream big despite her materially poor surroundings. Their love and example pay off, and throughout the film, Tiana and her mother reflect on James' positive legacy in their family.

Sadly, Tiana's experience has become far too rare in the black community, where the marriage rate is near a historic low, the out-of-wedlock birthrate is at a historic high of 70 percent and two-thirds of children live in father-absent homes.

Given these troubling statistics, Disney should be applauded for presenting an image of a married, black father who motivates his child to achieve great things. Given the film's strong fatherhood theme, the National Fatherhood Initiative is working with Disney to market the movie to dads and their families.

While stories like Tiana's have become too rare in the black community, there are still plenty of examples of how strong black families, headed by married parents, can help their daughters accomplish great things.

Indeed, James reminds me of another black father whose daughter found her equivalent of a modern-day prince — Fraser Robinson III, father of first lady Michelle Obama.

Mr. Robinson suffered from multiple sclerosis, but he went to work every day at Chicago's water plant, allowing his wife to stay home, and saving enough money to send both of their children, Michelle and Craig, to Princeton. Mr. Robinson died in 1991, only a year before Michelle married Barack Obama, but it is clear that his legacy lived on.

Most of us have heard the story of how Mrs. Obama and the president met, so I will not revisit it here, except to point out that Mr. Robinson's influence seems to have played a significant role in the course the couple took. The book "Michelle: A Biography" recounts that when Michelle started bringing up marriage with Mr. Obama, he was unsure of the institution's value. But Michelle, who had spent her life watching her happily married parents build a stable life for her and her brother, continued to engage him on the issue until he proposed.

In a video produced about Mrs. Obama during the president's campaign, members of the Robinson family reveal just how important Mr. Robinson's influence was in his daughter's life. Craig Robinson, Mrs. Obama's brother, sums it up best when he says, "My father was in his 50s, and my sister would still sit on his lap and put her head on his shoulder as she used to do when she was a kid. And that ... in one picture epitomizes their relationship."

At the 2008 Democratic National Convention, Mrs. Obama referred to her father as the family's champion, hero, rock and provider. And Mrs. Obama's mother, Marian, in the video mentioned above, gave this moving assessment of the legacy Mr. Robinson left for his daughter when she said, "I hope America gets to know the girl we raised and the woman she became. ... I wish my husband could see this day, but every day I get to see a piece of him in her. And for that I am so proud and so blessed."

Good fathers, like Mr. Robinson and James, are the first men to pursue their daughters' hearts. When they do it right — by pursuing their hearts in their daughters' best interests, not their own — it shows their daughters they are worthy of receiving love. Without this modeling, too many girls spend their lives kissing a whole lot of frogs and never find their prince.

And that's no fairy tale.