

2014-15 Illinois Head Start Parent Ambassadors



Ashley Maltas, Ronnie Scallon, Nina Scott, Alicia Maxson, Irma Nevarez and Stacy Prak



Nina Scott

I am very grateful to be a proud parent of a four year old, named Ayanna Davis and a recipient of Head Start Services. They have both changed my life.

At first it seemed unreal. As I was walking the streets of my neighborhood in Harvey, Illinois with my daughter I was approached by a young man who turned out to be a Family Service Specialist. He asked, "Is your daughter in Head Start?" I replied, "No." He then began to explain the simple enrollment process. I never expected what was next to come after I signed her up. The overwhelming feeling of being a single parent went away. Every staff member of the Head Start program became a part our support group. Thankfully, my daughter began to receive a quality education in a safe and stimulating environment and still is today, a year later.

It didn't stop there. My misconception that now I am a parent and it's no longer about me was not the way Head Start believed. I was asked about my goals and encouraged to run for a position on the Parent Committee. It opened the door of opportunity and I have never looked back.

In 2013, I was voted as the Policy Council Representative for Harvey, Illinois. Serving in that position allowed me to meet other parents, learn more about the Head Start Program, be involved in the decision making process, become more employable, and see myself in a different light. With the help of Head Start I received my food service sanitation certification and I regained confidence in my situation. My self-esteem increased, my attitude changed, and I started forgiving myself because I thought my life was supposed to be different. The truth is I am right where I am supposed to be.

Currently I serve as the 2014-2015 Illinois Head Start Association Parent Ambassador and the President of the temporary Policy Council for Community Development Institute (CDI). Thanks to Head Start I know I am more than a single parent, I am a voice for my community.



Stacy Prak

As a child I endured a great deal of abuse. I lived in several foster homes and was beat up by the world. My mother tried to work and care for us while my father was an abusive alcoholic. Of four siblings, I was the only one fortunate enough to attend Head Start. After moving out at 15, I struggled with addiction, depression, and post-traumatic stress. I was sexually abused and raped. My life was filled with shame and sadness. After marrying my high school sweetheart we tried to make the best of our life. As we got older we had our own children and the youngest attended Head Start. After graduating college I was unable to find a job in our rural area. I opened a small business that struggled significantly.

About that time is when my youngest was enrolled with Head Start. I began to volunteer and get more involved. The staff were a great encouragement to me and became my friends. I was elected to Policy Council and took advantage of the trainings and development available to me. I have learned leadership skills, communication skills, and regained my confidence. Because of the guidance, encouragement and love my whole family received, I have been able to apply those skills to my life and have experienced extreme growth. I have watched the positive effects on my family and children because of Head Start.

Now, after becoming a Parent Ambassador, I have even furthered my development and confidence beyond my greatest expectations. The respect, love, and friendship I have been shown is unlike anything I have experienced from strangers before. I was the only child in my family to attend Head Start and the only one to graduate college. I have finally found my voice. I am a respected person in my community and family. Through the entire process Head Start offered me respect, guidance, knowledge, empowerment and love. They wrapped their arms around my whole family and pulled us up from the tragic past we were trapped within. Today I feel proud of the person I have become. Head Start gave me the fundamental building blocks for a successful, accomplished life. Thank you to Head Start and the Illinois Head Start Association for all they do for their recipients and families including mine!



Irma Nevarez

I was a stay at home Mom of three beautiful children ages 8,3,1. It wasn't until a parent told me of Head Start. She took my information and shortly after my kids were enrolled in Early Head Start and Head Start. I was then elected into the Policy Council where I was able to obtain great leadership skills and was able to be part of a decision making process where I felt my

voice could be heard.

I then started to volunteer wherever assistance was needed. I had the opportunity of organizing an end of the year event for the children which was very successful. I was offered to take an "Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors" training. The workshop consisted of ten different educational topics. It was a great learning experience for me. I had the opportunity to teach other parents in various areas of education. I now have teaching skills that I never thought possible. Head Start has opened so many doors for me. It has made me realize how much potential I have within but if it wasn't for Head Start none of this would've been possible.

I realize that getting involved in your children's education is vital for long term success. I now share my Head Start story with other parents and tell them what a great impact it has made for our children, family and community overall.



Ronnie Scallon

DINKS (Double Income No Kids) is what my husband and I were called 14 years ago. Had you mentioned the words income based, family services or Head Start, I never would have thought it would apply to me. Our spending money was more than some people's monthly bills. We lived well.

I had met and married a wonderful geeky engineer and I myself was a software engineer in the NW suburbs of Chicago. We made good money and lived an envied life. Then 9/11 happened and my husband decided that since his family had sent someone to every war the US had been in, that he needed to go serve and protect the country.

Our lives changed. I became a military wife and because we had been told we could not have children, there was just the three of us. Husband, wife and a 7# miniature pinscher named Malcolm. My husband's first tour, he seemed slightly different, his 2nd a lot different, and by his 3rd tour to Iraq all signs of my engineer were gone and all I had left was GI Joe. While prepping him for his 4th tour, it was discovered that he had Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). His condition went from mild to leaving me with the angry spouse mentally at about age 5. I now had a husband and three children under the age of 3 to care for. I survived off of two hours of sleep.

One day I got a knock on the door. Three young women stood on the porch eager to tell me about a preschool program called Head Start. I wanted to shut the door immediately. Politeness kept me listening, but as the babies cried out and I could hear toys being thrown, I grabbed the paper and slammed the door. Two nights later, I thought of what they had said and focused on the issue of it being easy to sign up and the socialization for the children. I knew something needed to change, but how? I called and made an appointment the next day and I herded us all into the car. They did not have space for my youngest 3 year old, but they did have space for the older 3 year old and even space for my 1 year old in the home based program.

It worked wonders. Our eldest made friends and could be the social butterfly she was meant to be. Our youngest, had a teacher come out each week for nearly two hours once a week, to teach me how to be a teacher to him. The onsite worker suggested we attend Family Fun night. I was leery, how would my family be accepted? Especially dad. I had been pregnant for 4 years straight, although it was fall, all I was used to wearing were flip flops. Would we be
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talked about? My fears were unfounded. Dad was accepted and comfortable. All three of the children were able to socialize and I felt free for an hour or so.

Their dad went on to become the main parent/teacher during the weekly visits. During this time, I was able to cook and clean while listening in and let dad be leader and bond with the youngest. This gave dad confidence and made him feel useful to the family. Socialization is what I had sent off our oldest for but she gained much more than that. Her vocabulary grew and she gained math and even science skills. I was ecstatic to have my children learning such wonderful things. I accepted a position on the Policy Council, which I thought would be like a PTO meeting. Instead, I learned all that Head Start had to offer and how it was run. I had a voice in curriculum, hiring, firing, the planning of family fun night, etc. I looked forward to everything Head Start.

I had started out with the idea of Head Start helping me socialize my children. It did more than just help my kids play with other kids. It did more than help my husband with confidence and give him an outlet for his socialization and became a role model for his children. Head Start gave us a leader for our family. I had been functioning and doing for the family, but of course, I was just putting out fires. I was not leading. By taking some pressure off of me, I could think better, act better and lead. Working on Policy Council taught me how to fight again. To work with others and be a part of a team all over again. I had forgotten the person I used to be managing 20+ computer programmers, hiring, firing, leading project teams. But I gained that back and more. I learned to be an Advocate.

Head Start has given me a voice again, made me realize how integral a role they played in our family changing. We could have been a statistic...a bad one. But we have moved over the worst and we are looking toward the best.

I am not the old Ronnie. Once you have been an advocate for Head Start, you become a new person. Head Start took my chaotic family and turned me into a person I could be proud of. I went from knowing how to get to 3 places in my neighborhood to knowing how to find and gain resources for myself and others. I regained the strength to fight for my husband's VA benefits and getting him the medical care he so desperately needed.

I was....wait, it doesn't matter who I was. I am now a mom, wife and soon to be student working on my doctorate in natural medicine and a part time culinary program. I now have all three children 5,4, and 2 in Head Start. Head Start reached out its hand and gave us a hand up instead of a temporary hand out. We are better individually and as a whole. My Head Start family is now an asset to our community and my work as a Parent Ambassador of Head Start is that everyone know how Head Start impacts family and community through education, social services and even its emotional needs.



Ashley Maltas

After being in a 6 year relationship with my daughter's father, at 22 years old I finally had worked up the courage and strength to leave the abuse and became a single mother to my beautiful 8 month old daughter. At this point in my life, my daughter, Keelie and I were living on our own and I was working on my bachelor's degree commuting an hour away for my education. While I had the support of my family to help out with the care of my daughter, my needs for child care could not be fully met by them. I was worried that I was not going to be able to finish my education.

A few months before this took place, I had received a letter in the mail informing me that I may qualify for the Early Head Start program. Not needing child care at the time, I had set this aside and found it around the time I couldn't have needed it more. I called the number and had my daughter enrolled within a few short weeks.

I was not aware at the time that this wonderful program would not only allow me to keep my independence and stay on track with my educational goals, but also would provide my daughter and I with so much more. My daughter's classroom was like a second home that provided her with quality education, nutrition, and a safe family environment. Her teachers, as well as some of the other Head Start staff members, became a part of our support system and treated us like family.

After a few months of her starting the program, I was approached with the opportunity to be a member of Policy Council. At the second meeting, I was nominated and voted to be our Co-Chairperson. This position helped me to further develop my leadership skills and has become a part of my resume to help me pursue my career goals. Furthermore, I have developed so many great friendships and connections as well with other parents and members of the community.

From being a part of Policy Council, I learned about the opportunity to become an Illinois Head Start Parent Ambassador and eagerly applied for the position. I have now received the education and training to advocate for this exceptional program that has allowed me to be a strong, independent, and successful mother. I was given a warm hand up to help me pursue my goals and I recently graduated from Eureka College, summa cum laude, with a B.S. in Sociology and Psychology. My now almost 3 year old daughter is exceptionally bright and has gained so much from her experience in Early Head Start.

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Words cannot describe the gratitude I have for this program being there for me when I needed it most. I am excited to help others learn about this excellent program and advocate to keep it alive for another 50 years and help others who will also greatly benefit from it. While I have gotten as far as I have because of my hard work and dedication, I truly believe that I would not be in the same place that I am now if it wasn't for this wonderful program and all of the wonderful people who keep it going. Thank you!



Alicia Maxson

We found out we were pregnant again and my husband was temporarily laid off shortly after. We fell under the income guidelines and received the medical care for supplementary insurance. Shortly after our daughter was born and we had become a family of four, we enrolled our son in Head Start. After a brief period on the waiting list, he was accepted into the program. He thrived in the classroom and since that first, “bye mommy” our lives have changed. My Family Partnership Specialist encouraged me to run for Policy Council and I was elected in. It was such a blessing to know that my son had positive adult attention because I was struggling with guilt and trying to adjust to a new family dynamic. But I found something in myself. I was able to have a say over his education. My children both had a safe environment and I have been able to have an outlet to discover who I am and what it means to be a mother of two. I’ve been able to be a part of something wonderful and learned about parts of myself I didn’t know I had. I’ve learned to be a leader when I felt I had no voice. I’ve been able to demonstrate to my children that it takes a village to raise a child. My Head Start family has shown me I am strong and passionate. They have taught me I am my children’s biggest advocate and I am not “just a mom”.