



Illinois Parent Ambassador Program



**Real Parents
Real Stories
Real Impact**

JULNAR SHELBY



My story like so many is not typical. I have always depended on my mother and grandmothers to watch for my girls while I was at work, so when I found myself pregnant with baby number three and an 80 years young grandmother, I knew I needed to research other childcare options. I consider myself to be highly resourceful, so I was surprised that I was not aware of the Head Start facility across the street from my in-laws' home. I filled out the application and spoke extensively with the site director about my two youngest daughters a newborn Kiyoshi and two year old Kiyomi.

My two year old started first and no words could explain the level of anxiety I had at the thought of someone else other than my family caring for my daughter. Despite my reluctance I let her go and she did great. The teachers not only cared for Kiyomi like she was their own, they created an environment that mimics a homelike setting with love and compassion. The teachers also pushed her academically in ways I as a parent was not aware were possible; then taught me to do the same.

I always had concerns about Kiyomi's behavior and difficulty transitioning from one situation to another. It seemed like transitioning was always a difficult and emotionally stressful process for her. **I expressed my concerns about Kiyomi's behavior to her teachers who understood, observed my concerns and had her evaluated.** Let me add that these were concerns I expressed countless times with her pediatrician and was told were normal occurrences in a child her age. However, when her teacher had Kiyomi evaluated it was discovered that Kiyomi required an IEP due to a speech delay of a year, and social emotional difficulty with transitioning. **Had it not been for Head Start Kiyomi would have continued her educational career with none of the early intervention and speech therapy she received** all of which I attribute to the extensive success she has in kindergarten now. Head Start taught me how to be a better parent for not only Kiyomi, but my other children as well. I would also like to add that my youngest daughter, Kiyoshi was 6 months old when I enrolled her in Head Start. She is now three years old and **READING** at a kindergarten level.

Because of my support system at the Head Start center, Trinity United Church of Christ Childcare, I got on the Parent Policy Committee and learned I had a voice that could change things for the better and for all of the center's children. I am now in my second year as Chair for the Parent Policy Committee, a Parent Ambassador for Illinois Head Start Association and a soon to be law school student. Without Head Start my daughters, and my family would not be where we are today!

RITA CONERLY



I've always believed in early education. As a parent, I knew that I would enroll my children into early education as soon as they were able to get started, 6 weeks.

I am a parent of six children ranging in ages from 3-14, one being a boy (the oldest). My fourth daughter attended a Pre-K room of the church based childcare center. She began demonstrating aggressive behaviors and neither the teachers, nor I, had any idea why she was exhibiting such behaviors. Attempts were made to redirect, a child psychologist was brought into the center to observe her, I was asked to take her to a play therapist, and even told to take her to her pediatrician for observations... there was nothing clinically wrong with her, and she was not diagnosed with anything!

They gave up on her, kicked her out, and told me that they were unable to provide proper care for her. I was devastated and my daughter couldn't understand why she couldn't go back to HER school. My mother temporarily cared for her, while her older siblings went off to school and her younger siblings went to HER school. She began to question herself, developed a complex, and even labeled herself a "bad" girl. I had to find something, somewhere for my daughter to go so that she could be in, with and around other kids. My friend told me about Head Start, I had forgotten about this program, I am a product of Head Start. I immediately began to look into this option.

Once enrolled, she loved it! **In Head Start, she stood out as a leader and she no longer felt those complexes she had developed.** I could see a change in her character, she opened up, she wanted to be involved, and she wanted to go to Head Start! Her teachers didn't look at her as a troubled little girl or place behavioral issues over her, they didn't see any. I still worried as a parent thinking and wondering if those same behaviors she previously exhibited would start to show, they didn't. However, even if they did, I was assured that there were comprehensive services available to help me work with my child, and they too would work with and be patient with my daughter.

For me, Head Start HAD to be the way to go! I immediately placed all my children on the waiting list to switch them to Head Start. They LOVE it! Seeing how excited my children became about school excited me. I wanted to be involved and be a part of their early childhood success. Head Start let me do just that. I started with attending Family Meetings monthly. That evolved into me being on the Policy Council as the Vice Chair, and also to assume the title as Parent Ambassador with the Illinois Head Start Association! Head Start has not only given my children a start on their education, early, but also empowered me as a parent and person, overall. Head Start works for our children, but helps our families.

VALERIE YOUNG



My name is Valerie Young. I have two children and their names are VerTRUoz (Virtuous) and Sultan. I have been with Head Start since my son was two years old and my daughter was six months old. One of my sons is no longer in Head Start but VerTRUoz is four and still active in Head Start. **I am a veteran with the United States Armed Forces and have been diagnosed with (PTSD) Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.** I was looking into homeschooling the children so that they would have a personal, individualized learning setting. One day, there were people doing outreach in the neighborhood and someone handed me a flyer about Head Start. I called the number on it to see what the program was all about and to see if I qualified. Since I qualified, I met with someone and started home visits.

When we first did the home visits, the kids were shy and introverted; they were scared to open up. At that time, I was really trying to adjust back into society myself because I just got back from serving a tour in Iraq, so adjusting was an issue for me. I had difficulty expressing myself and I felt the kids and I were not on the same page of understanding. I was moody as well as impatient. Needless to say, I was dealing with some mental and adjustment issues of my own. I love my children, I just had expression issues and my children had communication/language development issues as well. **My home visitor, Sandy Biver, was very patient with all of us; she saw outbursts and quietness between the kids and I felt she knew the potential the kids and I had.** She insisted on materials for me to read, which helped me to control and adjust my outbursts.

As time progressed, I became relaxed and talked in a kid-like tone so the kids could understand me. The children are more talkative and more expressive now, and they socialize more. I give credit to my home visitor Sandy Biver. I am involved in Head Start activities. I am on the Head Start Parent Committee, Policy Council Chair for the 2015-2016 year and an Illinois Head Start Association Parent Ambassador. Throughout my time with Head Start I realize it was NOT only a learning experience for my children, but for me as well. I also had the opportunity to serve on a panel in Washington D.C. for the Birth to Three Institute to talk about my experience as a parent and how Head Start has influenced me in a positive way. The panel was broadcast in two different languages, English and Spanish. It was a humbling experience to be a part of such an event and I give credit to my children for opening the door for their time in Head Start. Eventually, I became the 'SIUE Head Start Parent of the Year' at the State and Regional level and I pay homage to my children, as well as the staff of Head Start for their time and dedication.

SHARON DEBERRY



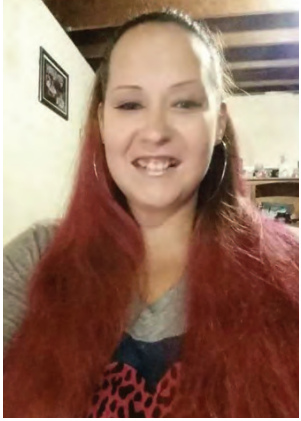
My name is Sharon. I have been a foster parent to children with special needs for 10 years. I became involved with Head Start because of Angela in 2011. We met Angela when she was a 6 week-old preemie in our local hospital's NICU (Neonatal Intensive Care Unit). Angela is 4 years old now. She was born drug addicted and with other severe medical conditions, among them were deafness, bilateral cleft lip and cleft palate. We visited with her daily and until finally we were allowed to bring her to our home from NICU after her doctors inserted a feeding tube. Angela also had four older sisters and brothers between the ages of 2 to 8 years old who came into foster care within the year. We offered to and were allowed to take them into our home so that Angela could grow up with her siblings in an attempt to ease the trauma of being separated from their family.

Angela had five corrective reconstructive surgeries before she turned 4. We are grateful that she was able to get Head Start Early Intervention Services and classroom based Head Start. It's been of singular value in helping Angela to be like other typical children despite the feeding tube, deafness and mobility issues. Angela's Early Intervention Head Start teacher trained me to teach her. I became an effective parent/teacher. She encouraged us to continue to use sign language to support Angela's expressive and receptive use of language. Her classroom teachers helped us obtain specialized services in the classroom. **Angela loved Head Start so much that she would run up the ramp in order to be the first one to open the door.** Angela's brother Jake was also enrolled at Head Start when he was 3 years old. He too had developmental issues and received speech therapy at Head Start. He now speaks with no noticeable impediments.

As for me, I saw that Head Start offered all parents the means to identify what it would take to make the best of their children's lives and their own lives. Head Start intentionally works with and develops plans for families offering opportunities to find jobs, better their education, end homelessness and make progress. This inspired me to become an active, consistent volunteer for Head Start. I currently serve as Chairperson of the City of Rockford Head Start Policy Council. I am a board member of Illinois Head Start Association and a member of the 2015 Illinois Head Start Association Parent Ambassadors.

When you support Head Start, you support children, mothers, fathers, and our community including people like me who care.

CRYSTAL SORTINO



I'm a single mother of two boys. Vincent is 6 years old and Nathaniel is 4 years old and I'm currently pregnant with my third son René. I started the Head Start Program back in 2012 with just my oldest being a part of the program. My oldest son's father passed away when he was only 9 months old. I lost everything and was forced to move. I moved in with my sister. I then started dating my life long best friend who helped me through the most difficult time of my life and helped raise my son. Six months later I was pregnant with Nathaniel.

Fast forward, my sons are now 3 years old and 1 year old. **Still trying to rebuild my life, not knowing what to do, and just starting to work while raising two**

small kids. In a dentist's waiting room a lady gave me a flyer and talked about Head Start. Everything sounded amazing to me so I gave her my name and number.

Two weeks later my oldest was starting the program and my youngest was on the waiting list. The program was amazing and Vincent's step-dad Mike and I volunteered every chance we could and enjoyed being a part of everything. Soon after, right before both boys' 2nd and 4th birthdays, Nathaniel's father passed away. Again I lost a partner and my son's father. The Head Start center was very supportive and they too were upset. They were really there for me and my boys.

A month later my youngest was accepted into the program and it couldn't have been at a better time. My oldest was having trouble coping and Head Start sent my son to therapy to help him. They checked up on us all the time. They helped my whole family cope. They stood by us and even attended his funeral. They even helped me take a college class to get started back at school. Both boys were doing well and progressing amazingly while learning so much. Not only did I have time to work again, I had time to cope with the loss.

Six months later when I was finally feeling like I was getting back on track, my mother passed away. Vincent was still trying to cope with the loss of his father and now lost his grandma. Once again **Head Start stepped up doing everything they can for my family in this tragedy.**

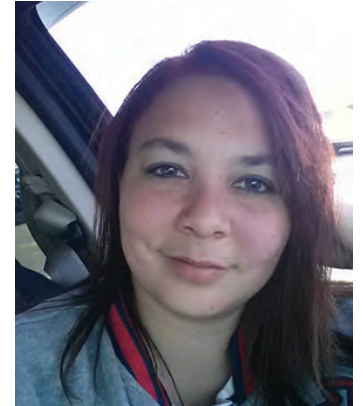
Vincent graduated from the Head Start program and Nathaniel stayed with the program. By the time Vincent left he was writing his name, knew his address, and was learning to read, etc. They helped potty train Nathaniel, he was learning how to write, knew his name,

and knew dozens of songs. They both always had a great meal, good naps, and tons of learning fun by the time I picked them up, and I couldn't be happier.

I have gotten so many opportunities with the Head Start Program. I started years ago as just a parent then became a part of the parent committee at my program center. From there I went to Policy Council and then Policy Council President, to currently an Illinois Head Start Association Parent Ambassador. I'm still a part of the parent committee and Policy Council. I'm enjoying and learning so much about the program. The best part is I get to be a part of my children's education. Head Start doesn't just help your children they help your families.

APRIL CULLIFER

My name is April Cullifer and I have two students in the Head Start program. Evie who is 4 years old and Slade who is 2 years old, have learned so much from Head Start. **When I was looking to place my children in Early Child Development I looked for the best fit for not just my children, but for my whole family.**



When I finally got Evie in her classroom we were a two-parent household, but because of many personal reasons we became a single mother household in just one semester of Head Start.

The support I got from the staff was phenomenal and her teachers were interested in what was going on so they could help Evie in her class. She had become very distant and unfocused in many aspects throughout the day. Once the teachers were aware of the troubles they started to truly help Evie cope with some of the issues she was having, and always talked to me and supported me. I was also lucky enough to be on the Policy Council for Head Start and the Policy Council was also very instrumental in our success at bettering ourselves, because not only was Evie getting quality education, but I decided to go back to school as well to better my future.

Since I have gone back to school I have become a member of a prestigious honor society and I know I wouldn't have been able to accomplish this without the support of not just my family, but the family I made in Head Start as well. They talked with me and set goals for our family and made sure we were staying on track for those goals. Once they were met we just made new ones to continue advancing our lives. There are a lot of preschools but there is only one Head Start.



www.ilheadstart.org

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