

February Vlog 2019

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: So, I told you I have a surprise for you today. So, let's come over here. We're going to push the elevator...

So, get in the elevator.

See where we are.

Oh my gosh! Check it out. Hello, Head Start. I told you this month's vlog was going to be different. So, I want to show you where we are. First, I'm going to introduce you to my friend here, Kama. She works for – Hang on.

Okay. You're ready? Look where I am! Oh my gosh! It's so exciting. I'm with all my friends at Sesame Street. That's right! I'm here at Sesame Street with my friend, Kama. She is – has worked at Sesame for 13 years. But most recently, has been a the – the lead on the development of Lily. And I talked about Lily last month. As you know, Lily is Sesame Street's newest Muppet. And Lily's homeless. And you know we're talking about homelessness. Now, before we get started with the actual vlog content, you know, we I always start with a love note. And I have a really great love note. Okay. You're going to be excited to hear about this, Kama. So, we have a Head Start in Atlanta through the Y. And they heard about the desire to kind of focus on homelessness. And noticed that they had a shelter very close to – to their – one of their centers. And this – the homeless shelter actually has a preschool in it. But, it's not – it's not certif – it doesn't have any accreditation. It's not a Head Start center. And it really – they really wanted to raise their standards. So, the Y is going to partner with this preschool at the homeless shelter, which serves about 65 children, and they're just going to basically give them all of the Head Start Standards that go with running a Head Start organization. Professional development for their teachers. Curriculum. Just general support. So, it's basically going to become a new Head Start center for zero dollars. It's just partnership. Isn't that great?

Kama Einhorn: Sure.

Deborah: That's the kind of love note we want to send out. So, way to go Y in Atlanta. I'd love everybody else to try to replicate that. So, exciting. Of course, my folks at home know that we're doing a home and Head Start initiative and that my goal is to enroll 10,000 children living in homelessness into Head Start by the end of the school year. So, this was such a great place to come because we know about Lily. And maybe you can tell us a little bit about how Lily came to be, and what your thought process was.

Kama: So, Sesame Street has a long history of tackling tough topics. And we knew we were in a unique position to address this particular trauma of homelessness. And we heard from our advisors – we have expert advisors in the field of trauma – who, when we launched our trauma initiative last year, let us know that specific traumas are also important to address, you know, in a more targeted way. So, we knew we could address this particular trauma with our light Muppet touch through the eyes of a child, especially for really young children, 0 to 6, where there weren't a lot of materials already. So, when we heard from advisors and local and national partners that there was this need to address this unique circumstance of homelessness, which has been described to us as trauma, upon trauma, upon trauma – that the circumstances that lead to losing shelter, the actual loss of the shelter, and then, the trauma of navigating the system and actually being without permanent shelter. We knew that we had to do

something unique in a more explicit way and that we had to actually show – show the experience through the eyes of a child, which is what Lily does.

Deborah: So, what can you tell us about Lily and her character?

Kama: Lily is 7. She is a hopeful and optimistic little Muppet. We made a conscious choice to make her look like a human. We call them humanoid Muppets because we wanted children to be able to relate, you know, pretty directly to her. We wanted her to reflect their experience. We also knew that we could never represent the experience of so many children and that homelessness looks different for every child and every family, and it's not the stereotypical person living on the street, it's car camping. Couch Surfing. Motels. And so on. So, we – Lily's story, her trajectory, has a few pieces. And she does mention staying in a shelter, staying with family friends. And you know, we get a sense of the overall chaos and unsure situation that she's been living with. Luckily, we get to see Lily's entire story, from when she's in the middle of her crisis and really struggling to overcome and having her family find permanent housing.

Deborah: Oh, that's really great. Do you deal – do any of the episodes deal with the stigma, maybe? Maybe her feeling embarrassed?

Kama: Certainly.

Deborah: Yeah?

Kama: We actually never use the term homeless. We'll say experiencing homelessness because our focus groups and our advisors told us what a sting that was to kids and families. And we really wanted to move beyond that label to – to help kids internalize this idea that there's so much more than this temporary experience that they're having.

Deborah: I really like that. So, rather than labeling – labeling a child with a certain adjective that describes them, it's just a temporary situation.

Kama: Yeah. It's a page – I think we said something like it's a page in their story. That's a chapter in the book of their family.

Deborah: So, children experiencing homelessness. Alright, Head Start –

Kama: Or shelter insecurity.

Deborah: We're going – shelter insecurity. Right. Right.

Kama: Or in housing transition.

Deborah: Right. There are so many different scenarios.

Kama: And for little kids, it was without a permanent place to stay right now. Or without a home of our own.

Deborah: So, you know that Head Start has kind of got this campaign. And we are always a place where families experiencing homelessness can – can come. But, in light of the recent numbers, I really just

wanted to focus on this and see what we could do, if we really took an effort to focus. So, my goal is that we see enrollment at – upwards of about 10,000 children by the end of the school year, which is a really, really tall order. But, Head Start reaches almost a million kids. So, you know, it's proportionately not unrealistic. But it is still a really tall order. Does Sesame, with – in conjunction with Lily, have any resources that you could recommend our friends in the Head Start world?

Kama: So, our site sesamestreetandcommunities.org is free and bilingual. And it's – it's mostly used by providers. And by providers, we always refer to anybody serving children and families in a professional capacity. So, a lot of our users are teachers, and Head Start teachers specifically. So, we've got specific resources like articles, links to McKinney-Vento, and – and activities that will help classroom teachers especially welcome children in transition into their classrooms, create a sense of safety and security, and of consistency for them and their families. Also, ways to answer those kids' really tough questions.

Deborah: Yeah.

Kama: They have some heartbreaking questions, and as adults, we don't always know the appropriate way to answer. But there are ways. And we have great recommendations, as well as talking to kids not experiencing homelessness in the class, and raising awareness, building compassion and empathy, which is, of course, something that Sesame Street does all the time, in different ways.

Deborah: That's great. So, it's kind of a great place to go. If I'm a Head Start director or teacher, and I know I've got several children experiencing homelessness in my center, that could be a place I could go to, at the very least, just make myself aware of some of the issues that the children might be coping with. And then also, I love the idea of approaching it as a whole classroom so you're also addressing children who may not be in that situation.

Kama: And it's a learning community.

Deborah: Yeah.

Kama: Really. And that's good. I think the power – those relationships and the circle of care that surrounds the child.

Deborah: Yeah.

Kama: We also have professional development resources on the site. So, providers can learn about the healing power of play. So, they're short videos. There are two up on the site right now. And they're more focused, complex look at the --

Deborah: Okay. So, – so a Head Start director could do a professional development meeting --

Kama: Exactly --

Deborah: And share those. That's great. What about – is there anything for parents that they might be able to use?

Kama: Yeah. Yeah. So, the site – there's a parent view for the site and a provider view. The provider view shows everything that's on the site. The parent view gets most of it.

Deborah: Okay.

Kama: And there are – for parents there are ways to talk to children about homelessness. And there's also a lot of ideas on soothing children, on creating a sense of consistency when there's so much chaos in their lives. A really sweet example is one mom in a focus group told us that she used an air freshener, the kind that sticks on the wall, as she moved from shelter, to friend's house, to hotel, and that that sensory reminder of – of home.

Deborah: What a smart thing to do. Wow.

Kama: So, a lot of tips like that, you know, don't require many resources, that are portable and that, you know, really can be done within the narrow limits of --

Deborah: That's fantastic. So, you all know that I'm going to be doing a meeting specifically for parents and Policy Council coming up here at the end of February. So, in the meantime, if you have meetings with parents, and you want to share some of those resources, I think that will be great. Sounds very creative. Very creative.

You know, one of the things I love about Lily is the tagline for her, "Home is where the love is," which is a great thing. You know, you think about home being not a house, but where the love is. So, can you talk a little bit more about that and the other messages that you want folks to know about Lily?

Kama: Yeah. It was really important that we convey to kids that home is not just a house or an apartment. It is a place where you feel comforted, where you feel competent, where you feel confident, and where you feel cared for. Right? And when you see a way to cope. That's a way of feeling at home. So, we have a short video on the site called Home Is where – where have real children in a shelter talking about what home means to them. It might mean their grandma's lap. It might mean playing ball in the park. You know, children basically showing resilience and finding ways to feel at home. And there are other some really important messages that we try to convey in materials. Number one is kids really need to hear – we heard time and again from providers and parents – it's not your fault. It's never anything you did. Children really tend to blame themselves, and it's a specific developmental situation that, you know, creates that, sort of, go-to response. Another is you will be taken – you will be cared for. You will be taken care of. Hopefully, it's by a caring adult, like a parent. But there is a circle of care, and there are adults that are working hard to help you and your family find better days. Another message that we really wanted to get in is, "we're in this together." So, if parents can convey to children that together you can get through anything, as long as you're together, that goes a long way in helping children feel secure. Another is that this is simply a temporary situation, that things will get better, and there is reason to be hopeful, and optimistic, that this is one page of the story, and that together, your family can, can turn the page, and things will shift. Things are always changing. Things don't ever stay the same, and that can really be a point – like an anchor point of keeping perspective and maintaining hope in these really dark times.

Deborah: Yeah. I love all of that. And you know, one of the things we've talked about with Head Start is – In a situation where maybe night time feels a little chaotic, Head Start could just be that consistency. You know, their cubby's there. There spot on the rug is there. The teacher's the same person. That kind of thing.

Kama: And you know, education, of course, is the key to a better future. And really, really young kids can internalize that and really value their success in school, and prioritize that, and really, you know, develop a strong sense of pride and accomplishment.

Deborah: Yeah that's great. So, you know Head Start is birth-to-5, and Lily is 7. Is that right? So, can you tell us if Lily had a younger sibling what she might say to that little brother or sister?

Kama: Certainly. One of the comfort strategies that we talk about a lot is having a comfort item, which might be difficult when moving around from shelter to shelter, and having a certain number of belongings. You know, having a limit to that. But we suggest some ideas. If it's not a teddy bear, it could be a small piece of cloth from, you know, a parent's clothing. Something that smells like a parent. So, Lily might hand her younger sibling a small item of comfort. It could be a ribbon. A piece of ribbon. Right? That was in mom's sewing box, you know, before they lost their permanent home. She might read to her younger sibling. Because she's 7, she's a reader. She might read her younger sibling the storybook called "We Got This" in which Lily is meeting a baby and a mommy bird who has lost their nest. And at this point in the story, she's – her family's overcome the challenge, and she is explaining like a survivor's pride, and she's paying it forward. And she's able to offer comfort, and advise, and help to these birds. So, these are some of the things that these caring 7-year-old may do to --

Deborah: Alright. So, part of what I like to do with these vlogs is give folks some tips, things to remember. Of course, we know that you guys are on top of all of this, but I always like to give you some reminders if they're helpful.

So, a couple of things that you want to remember. That you're prioritizing our homeless children when we are enrolling. I think most of you do that, but I think that's really important. You know that you can reserve slots for homeless families for 30 days, and if they're not filled and become vacant, you have an additional 30 days to fill them. But, I also want to talk to you about something that we talked about in Atlanta with the grantee that I was talking about earlier. Actually, the whole core of the Atlanta grantees work together to make sure that they are meeting the needs of the homeless population. And you can over-enroll in your classrooms. So, you can always bump up your enrollment if you need to, as long as you're within the guidelines of teacher-student ratio, and meet the needs of homeless families as they come and go. Because I do know one of the things that Head Start folks kind of experience – and it makes it difficult – is the transient nature of a homeless family. So, they'll enroll, they go through that process which can take, you know, four or five weeks. And they've done health screening and their child has adjusted to the classroom. And then they leave. And I know that can be really tough.

And of course, make sure you're looking at partnership opportunities. Head Start is all about partnership. So, see what you can do to partner in the community. Make sure you're getting your parents involved in that process. I think that's really important. And then finally, you know, I'm all about public schools. So, remember, your public school system has to have a homeless liaison. This is the person who registers and ensures that children registering for the public school system who are homeless based on McKinney-Vento's definition get the services that they are due. But that person should then be asking do you have any younger siblings. And I'm not sure all of our homeless liaisons think to do that. And we need to be the ones reminding them to do it. So, that if they're enrolling a first-grader, and there's a 3-year-old at home, it only makes sense that they enroll in the local Head Start and start to get those services. And the thing about Head Start that's different than the public schools is when a child enrolls in Head Start, they're going to get a bunch of wrap-around services that the public school's really not going to be able to provide. And that could help the whole family.

Okay. I have one more factoid. If you didn't already know. But actually, I know you don't know this, because nobody knows it except for me. But I'm going to share it. So, back home in my top drawer, I have this piece of paper. And I think I made this list when I was, I don't know, 16 or something. And it's things I want to do. And on that list, honestly, is be on Sesame Street.

[Laughter]

I'm sharing that with you.

Kama: You are the sunny days.

Deborah: I'm counting this. That's right! There's the sunny day. And I – this is just a lovely place to be. So, I want to thank you, for, you know, inviting me here, and for doing this here at Sesame Street. There's something very special about being able to do it here. And also, for all of the support that Sesame is giving Head Start right now. And you know, this is a great partnership. And I think there's a lot that we can do together. So, I really appreciate it.

Kama: Couldn't agree more. And we really need to thank you for the work. I mean, you guys are on the ground. Right?

Deborah: It's them. They do the work.

Kama: You guys.

[Laughter]

Really. Creating these materials for you to be right in there making a difference on the front lines is an honor. And we thank you so much for your work.

Deborah: And remember. Head Start is access to the American dream. Go make dreams happen.