

Love Notes from Dr. Bergeron

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: Hello, Head Start community. Dr. B here, ready to present my final vlog for all of you. I gave a lot of thought to how to do this and what I wanted to do, and I decided nothing would make a better final vlog than a giant love note. So, here we go. Giant love note from me to you.

We're going to start off by sending a love note to ABCD Head Start in Boston. They were my first site visit, and a wonderful Head Start cutie presented me with some flowers, which I'm happy to say I still have. And that memory is wonderful. That was the first time I decided I'd take my guitar with me, which was a big risk getting on an airplane. But it worked out great. And from then on, my guitar went everywhere that I went, and that's just a wonderful memory. So, thank you for that.

My second love note goes to Omar, who was a Head Start cutie at East Coast Migrant Head Start. It was my first migrant visit in North Carolina. And he was my first Head Start cutie to play the guitar with me and take this incredible picture. I just think his face says everything about Head Start that's wonderful right there in that picture. And what an incredible program that was. It was a great insight, a good lesson for me to see our hardworking families that make sure we have good food to eat.

And in the meantime, the Head Start/Early Head Start programs make sure their children are getting the programming that they deserve to be ready for school. And my best memory of that visit was I was gifted with a gallon-sized bag of blueberries that were the most incredible blueberries I've ever eaten. I don't think I shared one of them. I think I ate all of them. And I will tell you, every time I eat a blueberry, I think about the fact that somebody was part of bringing that to my table. And I think we all need to do a better job of remembering that, so thank you to our migrant and seasonal programs across the country that help our families.

To Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships that are in homes – those home-based programs. I want to give you a love note. I got to visit a program in Kansas City and it just touched my heart to see such a cozy place for children to be, and still with such rich learning going on. It was just a wonderful opportunity and it really made me think about these kinds of programs being a really interesting way to scale Head Start and Early Head Start because of the nature of them being in a neighborhood. And the feel was just really warm and pleasant, and I just loved it. So, here's to you, all of you who are in your homes providing the kind of quality that Early Head Start and Head Start have to offer. Really appreciate you.

To our 250,000 Head Start staff across the country, a huge love note out to all of you for all of the work. You are the front lines, you are the people who really make it happen. In particular, to our teachers and our assistant teachers, my heart is with you. You show up every day doing the hard work, making a difference for children. Huge love note to you.

And to our folks in the kitchen, the cooks, the folks preparing food for our children to make sure that they're getting the nutrition they need to be ready to learn. To our bus drivers, you're the folks who see our children first in the morning and you're the ones who see them last in the afternoon. You are the bookend to their day and infinitely important to setting the tone for those children.

To our office staff who keep the business part of Head Start running so smoothly so that all of the frontline folks working with children can do their jobs to the best of their ability, I know how important you are, and a love note goes out to you.

To all of our social workers and folks who work with our families, our counselors, anybody doing that comprehensive services work, that is the secret sauce here at Head Start. We know how important you are, and a huge love note to you.

And to all of our leadership, whether you're leading at the building level or a huge grant or a small grant, it's leadership that sets the tone and sets the values behind what we do and you have the opportunity to influence and make such a big difference. And I hope you'll take advantage of that and really make a difference in your program, and enjoy that opportunity and revel in the fact that you have such wonderful people in your stead.

And to our parents, all of our parents across the country, you are our children's first and most important teachers. And the advocacy that you learn in Head Start, I hope it follows you throughout your child's educational career. You are so important. And I think we have a lot to learn from Head Start about family engagement. And hopefully, there's more to come on that. I'm very excited about what you can demonstrate to the rest of the country in terms of parent involvement.

To all of our public schools and superintendents who have connected with the Office of Head Start during my time here and been so open to figuring out ways to better collaborate with their Head Start programs. I think we've really started something special. I particularly want to shout out Mort Sherman from AASA and Gracie Branch from NAESP, who signed a historic MOU with the Office of Head Start in December of 2019 and really laid the foundation for what I think is just going to be an incredible future for all of the families and the children and the staff – everybody. In trying to work to create this streamlined process, this streamlined experience for parents and families and children, and to create better relationships between early education, particularly Head Start and the public school system, I think there is so much opportunity that it has untouched and I hope you'll continue to tackle this challenge as you move forward.

A special love note to our tribal programs. I have to tell you how wonderful it has been to learn more about this aspect of our country. And our tribal programs do incredible work to prepare children for public school while preserving their language and culture. And I got to experience that firsthand in a number of different ways. And I want to thank you for being so generous with yourselves and sharing with me and for the continued work that you do day to day —

often in really tough circumstances and tough conditions — to make sure your children and families get what they need. It's been a pure pleasure to be connected to those programs.

And to our migrant and seasonal programs, like the one I talked about earlier, they're all over the country. And I so appreciate what they do to support families who live a little bit differently than a lot of us do. And to be able to provide them with some stability for their children, with some real opportunities for growth. And then, the support for those families who, as I said, are the reason that we have the food that we need to eat every day. And, I think it's just a wonderful example of communities working together, and I truly appreciate that.

A special love note to our Alaska programs. I had an incredible opportunity to visit eight villages and I think three programs that were in suburban/urban areas in Alaska. And looking at the challenges that they face that are so different, but that don't undermine at all the work they do. They do incredible work, bringing the culture into the classroom, helping children and families to maintain that connection, and working on language development and social-emotional skill development, and bringing families into that environment. What an incredible example you are of the kinds of things we can do when we come together. And it comes from the heart. You can feel it when you walk into those programs. So, thank you so much for all you do.

And a special aloha note – a special aloha love note to my friends in Hawaii. I was thrilled to be able to visit twice in person and once virtually, back to a place where I lived as a child for part of my upbringing. And it was so wonderful to go back and feel that aloha spirit and it lives in every classroom I visited. Watching the public schools work with those Head Start programs so closely in true, true aloha. And that beautiful nature of the people there lives in those classrooms. So, thank you so much. And even in that virtual experience this past fall, I felt that aloha love coming through the Zoom screen. So, 'mahalo' to you so much and I wish you the best.

And to my friends in Puerto Rico, another incredible example of communities coming together. We've all experienced a lot of challenge this year, but Puerto Rico is experiencing challenge upon challenge. And watching them deal with pure devastation of their programs, of their buildings and rebuild to, once again, come and serve those communities, those children and their families, and even reach beyond their Head Start community and make sure that they are there for their fellow citizens to support during some of the most treacherous times, dealing with a lot of trauma. And I just so appreciate that level of commitment.

And to our Head Start staff here at central office and throughout all of the regions, a huge love note to all of you. This video is meant for the programs, but you all on the ground know that it's these folks at the federal level that make it possible to run such a huge, intense federal program that goes federal to local. And it's through the support from all of these folks here at Office of Head Start that allow us to do that with such an incredible level of excellence.

I want to particularly send a love note to folks who rallied behind some of the ideas I brought to the table and really brought them directly to you. I could never have done that on my own. And together, we have highlighted the importance of site leadership through the Site Level Leadership Institute last summer, and I hope that work continues. We've made sure our

families know that they have a home at Head Start. We reminded the country that Head Start heals, that we are leaders in school readiness, that our best work shows up on the faces of our Head Start cuties, and, even during a pandemic, that we can work to keep their head start. It is through these initiatives that we have made a difference on the ground.

And in the background, there's a hero who rarely is seen. I have to give a love note to Jason Clemmons here. He has been my right hand, made sure I got where I needed to go, on the right airplane, in the right car, to the right center, and all of that in the background. I think I have two pictures of him through my whole journey because he always stays behind the curtain. But everyone out there needs to know that he is truly the backbone here, at least for me, and has really made this job so enjoyable. And so, a huge love note to you, Jason.

And finally, so many programs I visited. I wish I could name all of them here. There are too many to call out specifically. But here's a love note to all of you, whether I made it to your program or not, because I feel like I got a taste of a lot of different things that are out there. And unfortunately, my trips were cut short this year. I had some good ones on the calendar. Maybe I'll get out there in a different capacity at some point.

But what I saw is that we have urban programs. We have rural programs. We have frontier programs. We've got big programs and small programs. We've got programs that are led by folks who have been leading for decades and we've got programs that are being led by new folks and have new and fresh ideas. We've got programs through all cultures in this country. But they all come together around a common core theme, which is that through strong families, we can grow strong children. And I think it is that common thread that brings us together regardless of what the program looks like. And so, to all of you, I want to thank you and send you a huge love note for the work you do with our children and families every single day.

And finally, remember Head Start is access to the American dream. Go make dreams happen.

[Guitar music] Now, this is your part. We're going to do it in a whisper voice. Just start by saying, "Reach for the stars." Now a little louder. "Reach for the stars." Can you sing in a really loud singing voice?

Children: "Reach for the stars."

Dr. Bergeron: That's it! You got it! "I'm going to reach for the stars." Oh, you're so smart!