

## Relationships with Families: A Story That Starts with Recruitment

Brandi Black Thacker: Good morning, everybody. Welcome to Day Three. Can you believe we made it? We're here, and I could not be more excited. I know you all think I'm an excitable person, but today is the day that we feature relationships in families and make the connections that we've been experiencing together over time. We are literally going to jump right into it because we have such an action-packed morning. I don't want to waste any moments.

Let's take a peek at what we're going to get into today. First and foremost, we're going to do a little bit of the same rhythm that you've experienced over the last couple of days. We're going to have a parent panel this morning, which I cannot wait for you to see. We're actually also going to have this afternoon, a little later, this session on serving families of children with disabilities. We have a great closing in store for you guys today, so don't miss that. That's coming at about 1:15 Eastern today. Make sure that you stay with us as best you can through the course of your daily operations at your program.

The other piece that I want to offer here is the Interpretify widget. I heard that my friend Guillermo is on the line again today, and we just want to send all of our thoughts, prayers, and wishes to the island of Puerto Rico. We know that they're experiencing power outages on the island today, and that's where Guillermo is. But he's here, and we're grateful that he and his family are safe.

If you would like to have the Interpretify experience, not only do you see the instructions on the screen, but you will also find those instructions in Spanish in the Resource widget off to your right-hand side there. We hope you've enjoyed Guillermo this week. He is one of the most wonderful human beings, and we just appreciate him and his service and all of his gifts. Thank you, Bill.

All right. Guess who's back, everybody? [Laughing] Kiersten and David, it's Day Three. What's your got? How are you doing?

Kiersten Beigel: We're back. [Laughing]

[Crosstalk]

Brandi: Well, listen. I'm so glad that you're back, and we can't tell you how grateful that we are, that you've been with us literally every single day at the top and the bottom of the day. Live. This morning I know we have something a little special for the people in the way of reflections. Right, Kiersten?

We've been thinking about this whole notion of the reverence that we hold for parents and families within our Head Start programming. Each of you had told us your stories all throughout the course of our time together, whether it's been in the heart notes and side note. Feel free to keep writing us the heart notes. We are collecting them still, and we want to continue hearing from you.

For April and Megan, we've been collecting these notes all week from our colleagues across the country to capture two things: Head Start is hard work and heart work, which I know you guys

are no strangers to. [Laughing] What we've been doing is just offering the space for folks to capture either a heart note to themselves about how they've experienced their Head Start journey and the impact that they've had, and/or write a heart note to a person who has impacted them. We've been collecting these incredible stories of love and connection this entire week, and we're going to be showcasing those a little bit later today. April and Megan, if you guys want to leave one, we'll add yours to the list, too.

Kiersten, David, it all began with this notion of parent and families and their contributions and their leadership within the construct of our Head Start programming. I said something on Day One that we started – I'm going to look over here to the side – that the Head Start policy manual was published in 1970. But Kirsten, you have some extra history to layer in there too. Right?

Kiersten: Yes. I love Head Start history, in particular Head Start parent involvement history. People – David's laughing – I'm going to try not to talk very long because we have got to get to our panel. But fun facts – OK? – especially for those of you who are new to Head Start, the parents who are with us today, they're part of a legacy that began in the sixties ... we talk a lot about the legacy of Head Start, but parents in Head Start have their own unique legacy, as well, as part of that.

In the '60s, when the program was formed, there were all these shaping influences that really formed our modern-day family engagement in Head Start. First of all, as you know, it was the civil rights era and lots of activism and social change, a lot of things that we're still trying to work on today, even. That was going on in the sixties. When the program was formed, the war on poverty had this concept of what was known as "maximum feasible participation."

The way I think about maximum feasible participation is the way parents talk about it. Parent leaders talk about this idea of "nothing for me, nothing for us without us." The program was formed on that very value. Not only did the Cooke memos, which was – he was a pediatrician who helped with the founding Head Start – design this program as two generations from the very, very beginning, but this whole notion of war on poverty in "nothing for us without us," and "parents' preference for employment." All these things started at the very beginning.

All these messages, what we've gotten all week about parents who came into the program and are now employed, there are so many, I can't even tell you how many we've heard from you. You're all here today. That started in the sixties. The 7.2 was the first parent manual, that Brandi talked about, in the 1970s.

That's when these things that we do today in Head Start were first codified: parents being involved in the operations and the planning of our program, parents as volunteers in the classroom and being really engaged around education. The last thing I'll say is that Bessie Draper, she was the very first Head Start, Office of Head Start – not called Office of Head Start then – specialist that was a full-time federal person who just worked on this parent piece. She helped to draft the Parent Manual, which I just mentioned. There's a program, I think it's in Kansas, that's named after Bessie Draper. I just like to honor her whenever I can because she was also an important part of this legacy. Thanks.

Brandi: Kiersten, I did not know that. I did not know that. I've seen in the chat, too, everybody is offering these ideas and excitements about the Head Start history and really understanding where we've come from and how we get to carry this forward. It's just so humbling and exciting all at the same time.

David, I don't know if you would like to add anything else here, too, given ... I know a little bit about your personal Head Start journey, but also just given the connection to everything we've experienced this week. I wanted to create some space for you to share, too.

David Jones: Yes, just really quickly. After Kiersten, I don't know what I'm going to say that's going to have a lot of meaning, but I think our founding mothers and fathers definitely got it right. If you've been around Head Start long enough, you can't help but love the staff; their innovation, their dedication, and their commitment to the work. But my highlight, my fondest memories, have been my encounters, my conversations, the really difficult moments with families, because that, again, connects to the heart and the theme of what we've been talking about all week. Thank you. I'm so excited for the ...

I have a history of doing a lot of work with fathers. I didn't want to go into that conversation [Crosstalking] ... but yes. It's not just literally ... I'll say this really quickly. As a director, when I first started working with fathers, it was because I was able to be aware of some things that were happening in the community that impacted them. But realistically, I did it because we needed to really help mothers. If the mothers in our program were going to be successful, the men that sat alongside them needed to understand what we were doing in Head Start and to not be threatened by that great work. I really started working with fathers to help mothers and babies. That's all.

Brandi: Do you see why I am so enamored [Laughing] with not only our leadership at OHS, but this community across this country. It just ... blows my mind. I'm lost for words to describe how much you each mean to me – and you all know I'm not often at a loss for words so let's just observe how [Laughing] how rare that is, in and of itself. But thank you, both David and Kiersten, for your remarks.

I also want to share with you guys now – we haven't forgotten our good graces, because you guys have been the most competitive group I have ever seen in my whole life. I want to share with you ... [cue-up singing] the Leaderboard. How was that? That was the better segue today, right? [Laughing] Yesterday was a little weak. I practiced, practiced overnight.

We have some new leaders on the board today. We have folks who are up in the 17 hundreds. I know my friend Andy has been working so hard behind the scenes for each of you that have said, "I attended this, and I didn't get my points," or "I answered that, and it didn't work the way it needed to." He's been tending very feverishly to all of you who have let us know that things look a little off to the side. But don't forget to go visit the game center today, because there'll be new things for you to keep up and new ways to contribute to the leaderboard and your scores. Go check out who's your hottest competition. Not like I have to tell you guys that. You've clearly [Inaudible]

Also before we get started, I want to share. You guys have said this is your absolute favorite thing. You've told us over and over, how much you love these Head Start alumni videos. In

honor of our parent panel this morning, we want to make sure that you get to see as a kickoff into what we're going to experience with our families that are on the line with us today. Loretta Sanchez. Let's take a look really quickly, and then come back together and tell us what you think. Here we go.

[Video begins]

Loretta Sanchez: I believe that Head Start has been incredibly important to my life. My parents are both immigrants from Mexico. They had seven children. When I was a child, I was very enclosed in my own little cocoon of what my world was. Head Start enabled me to see that there was a much bigger world. I just absolutely loved it.

I learned my letters. I learned to speak. I learned how to write my name. I have such vivid memories. Head Start not only works on the kid. It works with the parents. My mother learned how to be assertive on behalf of her children because I was in Head Start. I have very strong parents who really believed in education. They taught me, mostly through example, that you can be whatever you want to be.

I was working on some education issues. I went to talk to my member of Congress, and he refused to meet with me, so I went home that night and I said to my family, "I'm going to run for Congress." And I did, and I won.

The future of what the world holds is really in the hands of the young people who are currently in Head Start or about to start Head Start.

For information about Head Start programs in your area, please visit [acf.hhs.gov/HeadStart](http://acf.hhs.gov/HeadStart) #GetaHeadStart. Produced in 2016 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

[Video ends]

Brandi: What did you guys think? Tell us what you thought about it in the chat. I know that we haven't done official introductions. April and Megan, I know you're going to do that in a second, and I know that we're going to have one other family member joining us, Kami. But tell us. What did you think about the video?

I see a lot of chat coming in. "Amazing story." "That was amazing." I see ... Oh, my goodness. "Awesome, beautiful, exactly my belief," says Hector. "That was great." "Inspiring." April, how do you guys feel about the video? Did you see anything that looked familiar?

April Messenger: Yes. I loved it. I had no idea that she was a former Head Start kiddo. Just another tool to add to our belt when we're fighting for families. That's what stood out for me.

Brandi: Absolutely. Hi, Kami. Welcome. We're so happy you're here.

Kami Smith: Thank you.

Brandi: April, I think I have droned on long enough, with all the anticipation of everybody who is here to join you in this conversation about Relationships with Families: A Story That Starts with Recruitment. Let me turn it to you, April.

April: Thank you, Brandi. Welcome, everyone, to Relationships with Families: A Story That Starts with Recruitment. My name is April Messenger, and I'm the director of Family Engagement and

Advocacy with the Washington State Association of Head Start and E-CAP. I'm also the program director for a little-known program called Parent Ambassadors that I think you might have heard a few things about over the last few days and potentially in your Head Start journey.

I'm delighted to be here today to moderate this panel with two fabulous parents, both who have found their voices and growth in being more than just a parent. Today we will share with you how relationship-building laid the foundation for partnerships in recruitment and sustainability of a local program here in Washington.

This story is sure to inspire and provide you with key strategies and supports to add to your toolkit for resilience, relationships, and roots that lead to recruitment, retention, and ongoing community partnerships. I love the story of Kami and Megan and their journey through Head Start. I'm sure you will, too. I'd like to take this moment to welcome Kami and Megan to the space. Ladies, if you wouldn't mind introducing yourselves. Megan?

Megan Pirie: Hi. My name's Megan Pirie, and I'm in Spokane, Washington. I am a Head Start parent. I have five children, and a bonus, so I would say six. Four are still at home, one a little bit older. I was a Parent Policy council rep. I am a Parent Ambassador alumni, as April spoke about. I am the co-founder of a grassroots movement called "All of Us or None" in Eastern Washington. We empower previously incarcerated people for full restoration of their rights. We're organized under Legal Services for Prisoners with Children.

April: Kami?

Kami Smith: Hi, I'm Kami Smith. I am a former parent ambassador as well. I help parents on our Policy Council. I do some teach-back from parent ambassadors and teach a little grassroots advocacy. I'm a family support specialist now at the site Megan and I met at, and so ... that's what I do.

April: Thanks, guys. Megan, can you tell us a little bit about how you found Head Start, some of the things you were hearing, and how you came to be enrolled in the program?

Megan: Sure. I have an older son who I had when I was a teen mom. I was fortunate. My mother owned an in-home child care center. She helped me take care of my son and teach him everything he needed to know to go to kindergarten, except for the social skills part. He had to do kindergarten twice to get it right.

Later on in life, I ended up adopting or fostering my godchildren. I had these two beautiful little girls. The social worker came to me one day and said, "It's time to put the 4-year-old into Head Start," and I said, "I don't really want to do that." It seemed to me like it was just going to be more work to get her there.

I took her to Head Start, and I didn't find a friend there. There was a teacher there who had been a foster parent, so she helped me navigate some foster things. Then fast-forward down the road – my fourth child that I had adopted – my adoption social worker became one of the directors or staff at a center. She was the staff over the family support services.

I posted on Facebook: "My fourth child care center. She just got in trouble again." She messaged me and said, "You got to bring her to Head Start. You got to bring her in." I was really apprehensive, but she found a full-time spot. I came in and I met Kami. I remember Kami doing

our review of our first assessment and saying, “You know, it seems like you have all these things covered. Let’s just set some goals.” I was in my forties, going back to school, was divorced, and I felt like I knew everything about parenting and didn’t need help.

I sometimes get teared up when I talk about me and Kami’s relationship, but Kami had been a Head Start mom and she had lived experience a lot like mine. She told me, “Let’s look at your housing. Let’s save money,” and I bought a house in 2019 before the housing market went crazy. I would probably be homeless right now if it wasn’t for Kami because I would’ve been pushed out of the ability to pay rent where I was. The home that I own now is worth almost twice as much as what I bought it for.

Kami saw that little ... she saw the advocate in me, and she also pushed me into the Parent Ambassadors. “You have got to come. You have got to come.” I didn’t want to go to any meetings. I’ve been a vice president of a PTA, and I’d done all the things with my older kids. Then it’s to the point where I would live for the meetings. “When’s our next meeting? What are we going to do?”

April: Thank you, Megan. Kami, Megan shared a little bit about being apprehensive about the program. Can you talk about some of the ways and strategies that you used to help her feel welcome and supported in that space?

Kami: Yes. I think that I understand that apprehensiveness. I think there’s a lot of stigma sometimes with the program, unfortunate stigmas that aren’t accurate. I think ... in school, they always taught me, “Don’t share your personal stories.” However, I found out throughout my work with parents that sharing my own stories has really helped make that connection and ease that tension.

With me, I really wanted to make sure that I wasn’t another face on the other side of another desk. I wanted to build a relationship and make me uncomfortable – and really reiterate that this program is a two-generation piece. We’re working with parents, and we’re working with the kids. We’re a united front. It’s not our program versus the parents, that we really want to collaborate and work together to have the best outcome for the family as a whole, and really just try to reiterate that whole piece that we’re going to work together. We’re not another person trying to overlook what you’re doing. We’re just a supporter.

April: I think we would be remiss to not have you share your story about how you went from being a Head Start parent to a program staff. Can you tell us a little bit about how that happened?

Kami: Yes. I came to Head Start as a parent when I was one week out of treatment for PTSD. I am a disabled parent. I have cerebral palsy. I was feeling just not like a good mom. I was thinking that there’s so many things that my kids deserve that I can’t offer them, that I haven’t been able to offer them. I didn’t think I was qualified for Head Start because I didn’t qualify for food stamps or anything. Someone said, “Just try.”

I went in, and we got accepted. I was like, “OK. Great. Now my kids” – I was just thinking preschool as a place for them to play, and I was grateful that my kids had a place to go play at a

park, with an outside space, because I can't chase them around a park. I was thankful that they'd get socialization because we didn't get a lot of socialization.

Then this person that enrolled me saw stuff in me that I couldn't see in myself. She kept inviting me to these meetings and these Policy Council meetings, and I kept refusing, but she's so nice. At some point I couldn't say "no" anymore. I said "yes" one time, and she said, "I'll even go with you. It'll be so fun. I think you'll be surrounded by so many people in the same situation as you."

I went and I got hooked. Then I furthered my relationship with my family support staff person. I just thought, "Man. I want to be like her when I grow up." I also applied to Parent Ambassadors and got accepted. Parent Ambassadors gave me a confidence that I didn't have in myself, gave me the confidence to go back to school, so I went to school to become a social worker. I'm now a family support staff where my kids went to school. It's really kind of full circle.

April: Absolutely. I love every time you guys share that. You talked about getting teary-eyed, and I'm over here, even though I've heard this story many times, it gets me, because Head Start has done so much for all three of our lives, I know. I just want to reiterate that I see you guys, and I'm so proud of the work that you have done and are here sharing with us today.

You both talked a little bit about Policy Council. I have a feeling. I know that one friend you are all referring to. Can you tell us a little bit about your experience with Policy Council? Megan, I would love if you could talk about how you ended up there and what that meant to you, and Kami, your role in Policy Council now. Megan, you can go first.

Megan: I think the thing about Policy Council was that I was invited to it when my older child was in Head Start, but the way that I was invited to it then was, "Hey, we need parents to come and be on this council." I thought, "I don't have time for that." Then when Kami invited me, it was like, "Hey, we have parents. We get together. The kids go in another room. We have food. It's a nice time to sit around. We talk about self-care. We do fun things," and I said, "OK."

I came to the first time, I think, that she invited me. Then the second time they were running, they were doing elections for offices. She said, "Look. Just sign up for one. We have one that like ... Nope. We don't do opposed elections. Just sign up." I said, "OK." So I signed up, and I became the WASA rep, where I would go to the capitol and learn.

I liked that because I already did some work, going to the capitol and advocating for formerly incarcerated parents. But the culture at Head Start was so different and so welcoming. When you walked in, we were hugging up, and we all had the same things in common, same issues with our kids, looking at their disabilities and their needs and how beautiful they were.

I think the first time we went to Olympia, to the capitol, Kami said, "You should become a Parent Ambassador." I watched all the Parent Ambassadors graduating and telling their stories, and I was like, "I want to do that, but I don't know if I can do it." I filled out the application, and I was too late. She's like, "We can do it next year," so I did it the next year.

The next year was the perfect time to do it because I had signed up, and I applied. I found out that I was in the program right before COVID happened, so every Monday night, we had a call,

and it was all of us parents together, really venting about COVID, but also finding resources and food, and everything: child care, self-care moments. Sometimes we just cried on the calls.

We talked a lot about race and equity. My children are all black. There was a lot of conversations, but they were all comfortable conversations, and they were with friends and with family. I think that was the important part was the way that I was invited and the way that I was welcomed. Then I was looking forward to it. I still go to the meetings sometimes – even after my daughter was in the first grade – would still come and attend the meetings because I just loved it.

April: Kami.

Kami: OK. Yes. We actually became our own contract years back. I was our first Policy Council chair after becoming our new contract. I was also a WASA rep. Then my kids were no longer in the program. Our component specialist wanted me to stay so we created a past-parent mentor position on our board – someone who has been on the board for Policy Council actually comes back and mentors and guides our new board through their year, which we've actually found to be very helpful.

Now my role in Policy Council is as a staff person – again, talking about for a circle – I am the main staff person that supports the board here. I do their ... I'm attending their board meetings, attending all the Policy Council meetings, connecting. If they want a speaker, I reach out and find speakers for them. I just support the Policy Council however they need supported on our end.

April: I see a question in the chat that I want to lift up right now. Somebody is saying that they're having a hard time getting their Early Head Start parents to participate in Policy Council. Do either of you have tips on how they might improve participation at that level?

Kami: I think ... I think you can, especially at the age of Early Head Start kiddos, I think a lot of parents are isolated. I think that just happens as a mom with young kiddos. I think the importance of talking about mental health and what socialization can do for you and for the kiddos. But coming from a place of lived experience is always important for me. I think just the socialization piece, and the importance of that. Then just explain that you're with peers. You're going to be supported and around other parents who are going through very similar struggles and situations that you are.

April: Megan, do you have anything you want to add there?

Megan: ... had a problem with my microphone. I do think that a lot of times we look at it as one more thing that we have to do instead of looking at it as "what's in it for us?" For me, I really needed that social support. Having the child care available so that we could hand off the kids and sit together and talk and really bond, I think that was the important part. Then when I came to the meetings, I felt welcomed by the other parents, so having that lead parent there that says, "Hey, come in. I'm going to welcome you." That really helped, I think.

Kami: I also ... when I first attended Policy Council, my family support specialist said, "I'll go with you." Basically she'll hold my hands the first couple times if I wanted her to. That made me



feel less isolated ... made me more open to attending. If there is a familiar face in the space, I think that also encourages parents to attend.

Megan: Yes, and I absolutely, too, I'm looking at some of the other times, too. We did gift cards for a door prize. We did a drawing for gift cards. We also did picking up food ahead of time.

April: Yes. I think I see in the chat also people are asking about virtually how to get people to participate. I know that one of the things that we've done here in Washington, and I think has been happening in a few other places across the country, is Policy Council usually provides food at their meetings, which is always an invitation that families appreciate around the dinner hour – gift cards were being sent to their homes or DoorDash certificates so that they could still order a meal during that time – I think especially during the pandemic really made a difference to a lot of families I know here in Washington. Megan, could you share a little bit about what you do to encourage other families to enroll in Head Start?

Megan: Yes. I think there's a bunch of questions about the Parent Ambassador program versus the Policy Council, too.

April: We'll get there.

Megan: I think we all know what Policy Council is. I think there's some question about what the Parent Ambassador program is. The Parent Ambassador program – the way that I would define it is like a leadership program, a mentoring for parents. They are teaching us how to tell our story and how to really make a change in the world with things.

April could probably elaborate on it more. When I went through the Parent Ambassador program, it made me ... every person that I would encounter ... I do a lot of work with parents who are formerly incarcerated or parents who are struggling with substance use. I'm a substance use disorder counselor. I used a lot of how Kami interacted with me to interact with the people I work with, too, because we are taught not to tell them our story but to make a relationship with them.

One person I can think of, in particular, I navigated her through substance use. We worked really hard to get her son back with her. He was placed back with her. He had all these needs, and we found a child care center and it just wasn't working. I'm literally texting April one day, and me and April are on different sides of the state, saying, "Is there a program here?" She's like, "Let me look."

We found a program, and we got our little guy into the program. Then the mom said, "They want to do an IEP meeting. What is that?" I said, "I'll go with you." I went with her to the IEP meeting because it was on Zoom, and we talked about his needs. I said, "You know, I'm not quite old enough, but I'll be the new grandma. I'm going to come in as the [Inaudible] or whatever it takes".

We did that, and then she said, "How did you learn all of this?" I said, "Through the Parent Ambassador program, and from going to Policy Council." Then I said, "You should apply for Parent Ambassadors." I sent her the link and she filled it out that day – that very minute, I think, and sent it in, because I asked her the next day. I said, "Are you going to apply for that?" She said, "I already did. Did they not get it? I really want to go." Now she's a Parent Ambassador,

and now she's telling her friends and sending her friends, saying, "I have this friend who just got her child back," or "I have this friend whose mom is in the hospital, and he really needs child care, and he needs to socialize."

It changes your life; and when something changes your life that much, you then want to help change someone else's life. We're really blessed in Spokane. We have a lot of different centers. We have centers that are black owned. We have centers that are dual language. We have a lot of centers, so I've been able to look at the parent and say, "OK. I think you would do better in this program here. I think you would do better with this person here because I know this person," and then just encouraging them to go to Policy Council and share.

This really feels good to give back what someone gave to you, to feel like, "Wow. I learned some skills, and I can empower." It's amazing to see her attending the retreats and sharing with other parents. We both were in the same space at one point in time. We both were incarcerated moms who hoped and dreamed we would get our kids back and be successful parents. I get teared-up thinking about that, too, but all of that would've never happened if I hadn't had the relationship with Kami. I think it's important that her supervisor saw that in her and saw the difference in her and her staff.

April: Thank you, Megan. Kami, is there anything else you might want to share with staff who are working to recruit and enroll families in Head Start, especially with the key focus today of relationships. It's coming out strong here, so if you have anything you want to share.

Kami: Yes. I think that if we come from the lens of just "relationship first," the data, the enrollments, the notes, all of that will come if their relationship is there, and it won't feel forced. Building relationships, it really makes the tedious part of my job much easier. Be a part of your community. I take my kids to library story times, and we do the free lunch programs in our park in the summer. My nephew does swimming lessons. All of those things in our community are opportunities for recruitment.

You know your experience with the program. You know the program works. It's just about striking up a conversation. Sharing from your perspective is huge. Being a part of your community and recruiting from within your community, and relationships first.

April: Thank you. I want to lift up some questions from the chat, which – I knew this would happen – we always get questions about Parent Ambassadors when we talk about Parent Ambassadors. I will share a little, and then I'll give these ladies an opportunity to share.

I'm also a former Head Start parent. I'm an alumni of the Parent Ambassador program from the second year that it was established. It is a year-long leadership and advocacy program that was developed and founded by a former NHSA staffer and a director here in Washington State that really has always put families first and foremost. Parents go through a year-long training, learning how to tell their story, learning about politics, learning about how Head Start funding works, how local child care funding flows and works.

They get training to go back into their communities and present at places, at their Policy Council and things like that, to help create a system where parents can feel empowered to fight for the

education and the well-being that all of our families deserve. It's in the fourteenth year of its founding.

We're now in nine different states across the U.S. We have two chapters here in Washington. Chapters might be the wrong word, but we have another cohort that is focused solely in one of our most diverse cities in the U.S. that has a simultaneous Parent Ambassador program. We work with other states to launch Parent Ambassador programs.

Parents receive 16 college credits when they go through the program. As you've heard, it really is ... it's life changing, and it is a complement to Policy Council. I will share my ... make sure you guys all have my contact information, and we can share some links so that folks have access to see how to get involved and how to create something that's similar to help really motivate parents.

I know that Head Start changed my life, and the Parent Ambassador program just complemented that. I wouldn't be where I am today if I didn't have those two programs, and neither would my children. Those relationships from the beginning are first and foremost. Megan and Kami, do you want to share about the Parent Ambassador program?

Kami: Yes. I always want to share about the Parent Ambassador program. I found the Parent Ambassador program and was lucky enough to be selected to be a part of the Parent Ambassador program at the perfect time for me, during a time of healing and personal growth. It really set the tone for where I am right now in life and for my kids. I learned so much.

I learned about communication. I learned about advocacy. I was told it was a year-long advocacy program, but it was so much more than that. I learned about racial equity because you can take advocacy with you forever. It's not just for early learning. As a disabled individual, I really have to always have that advocacy hat on in my daily life. Most of us do with whatever our circumstances are.

Those tools set me up to be successful. Still, I'm still using those tools, learning about equitability, and understanding how every individual has different struggles really put a stamp on how I look at the lens as a social worker, or use my lens as a social worker, and acknowledging that everybody has something.

Some people have struggles harder than others, but not only is everyone just struggling with a world in crisis right now, everybody also comes with different ... what am I looking for? different struggles, whether it be race, poverty, female ... or sex, orientation, able-bodied, all those things add ... they're just layers. There are intersectionality of people's struggles is difficult. I got the basis of that at Parent Ambassadors. I don't think that's highlighted enough for what this program does.

Also, I got to learn about financial well-being. That also set my family up for success, because as a parent who is impoverished, it's such an intimidating conversation. Where do you start when you already don't have enough money? Having the conversation with people who are in the same boat made the conversation a little less intimidating. It helps me ... that helped me guide how I speak to my families now about financial goals and financial struggles.

I also approach those from a lens of lived experience. I don't want to ever come off as mightier than thou because I'm on the other side of desk. That's really, really important to me as a family support person, because I know, and I can only imagine how many other desks that these people have to go to just to survive. I don't want to be a place for them to go and just survive to get their kids' preschool. I want to be a place where they can trust me, and that they can come to me if they need anything. I don't want to be another "to do" on someone's checklist. I want to be that relationship for them. Parent Ambassadors really set me up for that success.

April: Kami, I think you just gave me a tagline for a flyer and some recruitment materials. That was beautiful. You really do embody what a family support specialist should look and be like. Thank you for sharing today. Megan, do you want to share?

Megan: My microphone's not participating. I think when we really talk about engagement and pulling people in, there's so much to be done. We call it recruitment, but it's just making people aware. Sometimes they don't even know what's out there that they can access. We are always working to expand it ... we talk about accessibility ... but having someone to walk you through the part of accessing. Sometimes if we just tell somebody, "There's a resource here for you," we're not likely to go try the resource. But if I have somebody take me and walk me through the resource, I'm really going to engage.

I'm seeing questions in the chat about "how do we do this and be bipartisan?" Because I'm a formerly incarcerated person, I'm fighting for restoration of our rights. That's a human thing for everyone. Whether you consider yourself to be a Democrat or Republican or whatever you consider yourself to be, I would just like us all to have our rights.

I remember one time walking into a meeting, and there was someone wearing a MAGA hat. I'm just going to share this. I looked at Kami, and I said, "I'm going to take my black kids and run." Kami said, "Isn't it cool that there's a dad here, because dads don't usually participate in these, and he's here, and he is with his kids." I thought, "Wow. That's really cool." I didn't think again about the hat or the differences that we had. I just thought about how cool it was that there was a dad there.

I can share my own personal experience. My fiancé – we're not married yet – saw what I went through with the Parent Ambassador group, and he applied. He's a Parent Ambassador this year. He was like, "I have to go do this before our kids are too old," because our youngest one is seven now and they expanded the age to be able to apply. He's learning and he said, "I'm going to set up that appointment with my representative, and I'm on these calls," and he's over here taking notes and asking the kids, "What did you learn in Head Start? What do you know?"

Our daughter will come home from school, and she's had a hard day, and he'll say, "Didn't you learn to keep your shoes on when you were in Head Start? Why are you still taking your shoes off and throwing them at people?" He's sharing it with other fathers and other parents, "Did you know we have a Head Start program."

There's a lot of talk about eligibility. I think we all three of us said we didn't know if we'd be eligible, if we made too much money, if our kids didn't have the disabilities that were required. I think it takes the right person to say, "I see a need here. Let me connect your need to this

group that can really help you.” So yes. If there’s anything we did in our communities, I’m always talking about Parent Ambassadors, or not just Parent Ambassadors but Head Start, what are the pathways in.

I had issues with transportation, and I had issues – I got full day, but then, what do you do in the summer time. I’m still out here advocating. I’ve got a grandchild who’s going to turn four in November and he’s going ... they live in California. Guess what? He’s going to Head Start. We found a program down there. We were visiting, and I was like, “You don’t take him to Head Start?” It’s been amazing.

Kami: Can I say something else? The story Megan just shared about the dad with the MAGA hat. I think also part of our job – parents come to us in crisis often – part of my job, and what I love to do, is focus on being strengths-based. Even though parents are coming to us in a crisis – say a family’s electricity got shut off, and they are beating themselves up about it – there is still something that they’re being successful at in that moment. I try to pull that out for every family in times of crisis.

When they’re not feeling that they are being the most successful parent that they can be, pointing out that they have those strengths helps empower those parents to stand up in those difficult times, because everyone has something they’re being successful at in that moment. It’s not all doom and gloom. You have some successes.

Part of my job is to pull those successes out for those families and focus on being strengths-based. If someone comes in wearing a MAGA hat and we’re having an equity conversation, good for that parent to come and want to be a part of the conversation. There’s always something that can be strengths-based and that can be pulled out for those parents.

April: Absolutely. Thank you, Kami. I know that we’ve all mentioned Parent Ambassadors because it’s been life changing for us, but not everybody has a Parent Ambassador program. I think what I would like highlighted out of this conversation is it’s about the relationships that came from Parent Ambassadors, and a structure, and another leadership program that believed in us all.

We all had someone at Policy Council who held our hand and pushed us to do better and be better alongside us, not kicking us through the door. For those of you that don’t have a Parent Ambassador program, there are other ways that you can access the same kind of curriculum and the same kind of program that we have here. I don’t want it to be a Parent Ambassador recruitment session, but it truly has been so impactful for all of us that it’s hard for us not to share how that has come to be and how we’re out in the community fighting for Head Start.

We do advocacy at the state and federal level for Head Start, and it’s made quite an impact. Some of the stories that we’ve shared on Capitol Hill that have all come from programs that are doing great work in communities. I just wanted to throw that caveat in there. We just have a few more minutes. Is there anything ... What’s your one last thing you might want to say about what we’ve all been talking about today?

Kami: I think that my point is that being in family support is relationships. That's the first part of the job. I think that's where we need to come from. That needs to be our priority. Like I said before, the data, the notes, all of that will come if you have those relationships built.

I am reading the chats a little bit. I want to say, I didn't mean to make anything political. MAGA was just an example of the topic, and I didn't mean to make anything political. I'm sorry if I offended anyone.

It's about keeping relationships first and building that trust because everybody needs a place. Everybody deserves someone to come to, where they're not going to be made to feel "less than," or where they know that they can trust. I think if we continue that with that mindset, we will be successful and ultimately the parents will get to be successful, too, and then feel empowered.

April: Megan?

Megan: I think, too, that I'd been a parent, when I accessed Head Start for the second time, I'd been a parent – I think my son was in his twenties – I thought that I pretty much was a seasoned parent. Head Start was the first place I learned that I was the expert on my child. I'd never had someone tell me that before. I'd been a foster parent, I'd raised a child in difficult circumstances as a single parent, lived in poverty, but it was the first time someone said, "You're the expert on that kid."

I went to every meeting after that, telling them, "Look, I'm an expert. That's my child. I'm letting you keep my child." I've never heard that before. When Kami said that [Inaudible] "Wow!" I'm not even her biologic parent, but I know more. I've been through more with her. I think that the best thing we can do is to make our ... let them understand. We don't have to make them feel that way. It's already inside them. Bring those things out.

Kami used to call me – we still connect years down the road – and she'll say, "Do you know a resource for this?" Or I'll see something that they've posted – we made a Facebook page for our Head Start – and I'll say, "That's really cool. There's a free workshop for kids this weekend. I'm going to take my kids. I'll see friends from the Policy Council there." I think it's ... we're talking a lot about Parent Ambassadors, but Parent Ambassadors was something created to continue Policy Council and a lot of the work.

I also want to apologize if I offended anybody with the MAGA comment, but for me, that was just different to me, not at all involving politics, because I think we all need to be engaged in the conversations about politics. I think that that was what was most important, and [audio disruption] Head Start was where I learned that I wasn't the only parent that was struggling, and that the struggle with other parents could help me. I'm really thankful for that.

April: Thank you both so much. I can tell by the chat everybody loves your stories just as much as I do. Thank you for being here today and being vulnerable and sharing some really great strategies that can help others as they think about this work. I think, Brandi, this is where I turn it back over to you.

Brandi: April, I hope I'm able [Laughing] to have any words in an order that makes sense to anybody after getting to experience that incredible opportunity to share space and time with each of you. What an incredible honor to have the gift of your stories and your insights.

April, you said, "your vulnerabilities and your transparency." We've had to stand in some hard things, and we haven't always agreed on those things, but the message here is, "We love each other enough to stand in the spaces, especially when it's hard." You guys have shown us so many examples of what that looks and sounds like today. It's why we continue to be successful, and why the love that is manifested in this space continues to ripple out from each of you and your impact.

I don't have the proper words today, April, Megan, and Kami, to express the depth of not only my personal gratitude but the gratitude of this entire thousands-of-people audience. But I hope that you see and feel the love and respect and reverence for each of you in the chat – not only what you've inspired, but what you've confirmed for each of us today.

Thank you so much. I know we have just one minute left, friends, and I hate to leave everybody, but we have so much more in store for you today. Don't forget to – and Megan helped me remember this earlier – I was going on about all the things that I've been juggling. She said, "It doesn't sound like you're doing much self-care, Brandi." I was like, "Can we hang out more? What's your number? Let's text."

I'm going to make it a priority to check by the Wellness Center before I leave the institute this week, and I hope you do, too. There are amazing things over there, including – and I want to say it while she's on the line – a recipe book by our one-and-only Chandra Yule, who created it alongside a lot of our Regional TA colleagues at a recent meeting. You have to go find that. There's lots of yummys in there.

Speaking of TA colleagues, guys, I don't know if you've seen these welcome videos, but we have our colleagues who are family engagement specialists and grantee specialists giving you welcomes every morning. It's one more way that we're showing you that we're all connected in the partnership, not only from PFCE and PMFO, but how we do what we do across the country in tandem, hand in hand, in relationship with our roots and mind and resilience. It's how we do what we do, you all.

All right. You get your wellness break. Stop by. Join us over there in the center. It's 15 minutes today. Come back, East Coast Time 12:15, for the Engaging Families of Children with Disabilities session. We'll see you there.

April, Megan, and Kami, much gratitude. Thank you all so much. It's an honor.

Kami: Thank you.

Megan: Thank you.

April: Thank you.