

## **Head Start: One Father's Journey**

by  
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I have full custody of my grandson Jahlil, who is now 6 years old. By the time he was 3, I knew he needed to spend time with other children, develop his social skills and be ready for kindergarten and first grade. I want to give him the best of everything. And that led me to the ABCD Head Start Center in Roslindale, Mass., a neighborhood of Boston. I didn't know about Head Start when my three sons were small. I'm grateful that I found it for Jahlil.

I didn't realize so many good things could happen in one little building. That center – and the teachers and staff members there – opened up new worlds for our family. Along with the very best in early care and education for children from low-income families, the program offers resources that help entire families get ahead: nutrition programs, literacy learning, leadership opportunities, English for Speakers of Other Languages, a summer jobs program for my teenage sons, and so much more.

Jahlil thrived during two momentous years at Southside Head Start. He is currently finishing his first year of kindergarten at the Edward W. Brooke Charter School in Roslindale. He is reading at the second grade level. He loves school and he loves learning.

Years ago, I didn't have much time to get involved in my children's education. I always worked two jobs, trying hard to stay ahead of the game, to pay off my mortgage and have money in the bank. I served in the military. Then I was hurt badly in an accident at my second job on a trash collection truck. Now I am receiving physical therapy and struggling to recover.

For me, as a grandfather and "single parent," ABCD Head Start was an eye-opener. The Southside Head Start Director, Ashy Hosseinmardy, noticed that I always stayed around to talk to Jahlil's teachers. She liked that and got me involved with the parent policy committee that helps to govern Head Start and gives parents a voice in their children's education.

I joined the ABCD Head Start "Good Guys," an initiative that supports Head Start fathers and other men in more actively participating in their children's lives. It started small, 10 years ago, with only a few fathers and now there are 200 men in the program. Now everywhere you look in Head Start, men are involved. The ongoing Good Guys "Read to Your Child" campaign has resulted in tens of thousands of books being read to Head Start children.

Suddenly, I was a candidate in the ABCD Citywide Head Start Parent Policy Council elections. I became chair of that group, representing all the parents in the network that serves 2,500 low-income pre-school children and their families.

I accomplished things I never dreamed of. I ran citywide meetings. I spoke at special events. I was involved in the hiring of teachers and in disciplinary actions. I represented Head Start parents at meetings in Boston and at state and national conferences.

Head Start taught me that all parents – no matter how busy – need to be strong advocates for their children and to work with teachers and schools every step of the way from preschool to kindergarten and on up the educational ladder. Because of Head Start, I became a lifelong advocate for Jahlil and my older sons. It is making all the difference for us.

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