

36th Annual National Head Start Training Conference Parent Interview: Sandra Reza

(link for viewing at end of transcript)

Jarma Wrihten: Hi Sandra, how are you today? Sandra: Fine, thank you. Jarma: We're happy to have you here at the Parent's Place at the ECLKC, which is the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center. And today we would love to encourage you sharing your story about how you support your child's learning in the home.

You know we have a lot of research about parents being the first and most important teacher and over the time what it really yields about school success and readiness and being prepared for life. So we'd like you to share how you support the learning, what are some of the fun things you all do together, how has your involvement been in Head Start, and how has Head Start help you to evolve into this "Super Parent?"

Sandra: "Super Parent," that's a way to put it, huh? Well I started out, I was a Head Start kid in San Pedro. I got the benefit of it and I still remember my teacher. She let me paint a picture of myself on her skirt and years later it came to play that when I first went into teaching, I met up with her again and she keeps those things and it meant a lot to me, and I'm a mom of four of my own children, four step-children.

I have eight grand-babies, so I've got my children going to Head Start alongside of my grandchildren going to Head Start. So I feel really lucky in that since to watch them grow together and see the differences between, "Oh this one's my son, I got to do this," and, "This one's my grandbaby I got to do this." Still got to be grandma that way. It's been good for me. My oldest girl is – my oldest, myself – is fourteen. She started in Head Start when she had some mental difficulties at a young age and I needed help, first time momma out. It really helped me.

They told me, "No, it's going to be okay. Why don't you take this psychology class and you'll know more about your daughter," and I ended up going to school and getting a psychology degree. All along the teachers helping me and the Head Start staff going, "You can do it. You can do it!" And then my kids trickled down, the next one went to Head Start. They had told me that she was deaf. They wanted to put her in an institution. I was like, "No! Help me! Help me!" You know? They did.

They came through and they taught me sign language and how to interact with her, and then my next son when he was born he had some difficulties, and we put him through the Head Start program. They were the only ones that would accept him with his disability, and I was just feeling so blessed that there was somebody out there to help me because I wanted to still go to school. I wanted to learn.

I wanted to get my degrees and it was like, "If I have all these kids to take care of, where's some help for me to get along?" And then the youngest one, Sammy, he's in it now with my grandson in it, and he's having a ball, and they encourage him. He likes to draw. He actually drew some pictures that they put on the Christmas cards, and I'm going, "Well maybe some day you'll be somebody and you'll be able to look back and say, 'That was the first art that I did, the artwork for Head Start.'"

Jarma: Wow. You have such a vast experience with all of your Head Start, I mean with all of your children – from your grandchildren to your children and then your own experience. So when you all are together, what are some of the things that you do so that you're promoting the learning? I understood you sharing about the sign language. How do you enjoy the together-times to promote learning in the home?

Sandra: I know that I love the sign language. My daughter actually is able to verbally speak and stuff now. She's eleven. But my grandson, who's two, has been diagnosed deaf. And so I'm going, "Okay. I forgot some of the signs and stuff. I've got to bring them back and remember now so I can help him." So now I'm starting to teach him how to do sign language so he wants to eat and he wants his juice and stuff. And I'm going, "This is cool because I did it with my daughter," and then I didn't have to do it anymore so it went to the wayside, but I brought it back because now I'm

trying to help him.

And it's nice because in helping him, I have to teach the other children because they need to be able to communicate with each other, and another thing with my family is that my husband is Hispanic and Filipino and some of my grandchildren are African-American and so we have all these cultures in my family, so we love to go to the multi-cultural fair. We have such a good time.

And the one daughter's taking (inaudible), she's taking Korean dancing, and she's taking Tribal dances, and I like to encourage them to try everything that you can possibly try. Don't let anybody tell you, "You can't do this, you can't do that," because of stereotypes and stuff. You can do whatever you want to do.

Jarma: And so if you had to share all of that, what would you tell other parents? What would be some words of wisdom or encouragement to other parents about taking advantage of parents as the first teacher, but just being a parent in general and how that goes beyond just the scope of the house and goes elsewhere?

Sandra: Well parenting's a struggle. It is. It is a hard struggle, and if you have difficult children with problems, it's even harder, and you have to be able to share with other parents, which is why I got involved with the parent part of the Head Start – other women to talk to. "If I'm going through this, I know you're going through stuff too. You know? Let's talk." I worked my way up. Like I said, I was a Head Start teacher also -- by the way, I don't know if I mentioned that, but I did that right out of school because I wanted to give back to what I thought had been given to me.

Now I'm on the parent policy committee and I'm trying to encourage the parents that I work with to speak up. "You are your child's first teacher and sometimes the staff might forget that, and if it wasn't for you and your child, there wouldn't be Head Start." And so it's like, "Come on. Tell us what you need. Tell us what I can do to help you." I can pass those financial aid papers. I can..."Oh we can get you into college if you want to go to college. I know how to do that." So it's just that you have to tell them that you can do anything.

I'm right now in the process of trying to apply...I want to see about running for mayor of my little town that I live in and my son is so proud, "My mom's gonna be mayor some day!" And I go, "Yeah. And now that we've had such a change in our government," I go, "you might be president some day," and it's beautiful to see all of the new changes that are coming along. Jarma: And so with that being said, how would you...what's your vision for the future of Head Start?

Sandra: I'd like to see some bridges being built. I think that with the way the economy's gone and everything else that we need to start... We need to collaborate with school districts. We need to not think of pre-k as a big "against us." We need to work together. We need to make sure that staff and parents got this bridge and link together because they can teach each other so much, and the kids are the future, and we got to start now. And we can't forget that in the course of teaching them -- reading and all these other things -- we got to love them first.

And I look at the staff that I get to talk to and the parents that I get to talk to and all the kids and I'm going, "I may have started out a momma of four, but I'm a mother of seventeen hundred and eighty kids right now." Jarma: Wow. Sandra: And I love it.

Jarma: And that's compelling because...

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