36th Annual National Head Start Training Conference Parent Interview: Tonette Barnes

(links for viewing and download at end of transcript)

Jarma Wrighten: How are you today? Tonette Barnes: Fine, thank you. Jarma: We want to thank you for coming out with us at the Parent Place at the ECLKC, which is our Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center. Are you familiar with that? Tonette: No, I'm not.

Jarma: Well we're going to share some good news about that as well today as you share your Parent as Teacher in the Home story. So, what I'd like to start with first is you were giving me a little background about who you are and your...the name of your center, your daughter? Tonette: Okay. Jarma: ...who was formerly enrolled in the Head Start program.

Tonette: Okay. My son, who was formerly enrolled in the Head Start program, his name is Bobby Austin. He is now twenty-seven years old. So, I'm a former Head Start parent. And I also want you to know that that was a very, very, most rewarding experience for both of us when I enrolled him in Head Start.

Jarma: Wow. I know, and he's now twenty-seven. So has that been great to know and catch up about where our children are today, our young man today. And so we'd like to glean from you some of your most important, wonderful highlights of your experiences in Head Start. Like when he attended Head Start, how did you support his learning? And now that he's grown as an adult young man, how do you feel that you have helped him prepare for his school success and life now?

Tonette: Okay, well Head Start...his Head Start experience, as I said before, was very rewarding for myself and him. I got there and it seemed like it became a second home. Head Start became my extended family. And as a part of me participating in Head Start and him being enrolled in Head Start, I was able to participate on several committees, parent committee meetings, the policy council meetings.

I got to learn the foundation of Head Start, I got to learn the actual curriculum because I wanted to know what he was doing and what he was being taught.

So I stayed in the classroom, of course I had to build a rapport with his teachers because I wanted to feel welcomed -- I didn't want them to feel threatened that I was watching them -- and I wanted to commend them in regards to having the patience and having the genuine concern for him being able to develop the skills that he needed to go on to kindergarten and public school as well. That was very important to me.

Jarma: And you said some real key elements because just thinking about how our children transition from the Early Head Start to Head Start, Head Start to kindergarten and the next level, we as parents have to really make that impression upon them, not only the child but the teachers too how important it is for you, for the child to be able to be ready to succeed. And we talk a lot about school success. So now that he is an adult young man, where is he now?

Tonette: Okay, he went to Frost State University, I'm sorry Frostburg University, from there he went to Towson. He works with computers. He got really interested in that. He talks about his Head Start experience. I still see some of his classmates; they went on to several different aspects also: law enforcement... Just the whole Head Start experience started right there. It was a stepping stone for him and it just put him on the right track and he's been going ever since.

He's very polite, he's a very good child, has never been any trouble, always interested in trying new things, he doesn't see things as a problem, he sees them as challenges. And when he needs some help to overcome those challenges, he knows where to come back to, his mother because we started out in the same setting: Head Start.

Jarma: Wow, that's a beautiful story. So now in this role as the adult young man, what are some together-time

activities that you do? It sounds youthful or juvenile to say "together-time" but even as we're older adults... Tonette: Right.

Jarma: ...we still have that time where we want to spend with Mom or Dad. Tonette: Yes. Jarma: So what are some of the things that you all do and how do you see that your influences made a difference when you're together?

Tonette: Okay. Back then, as a single parent, I had to make a lot of compromises, so I didn't...I wanted to go back to college. I really didn't feel comfortable at that time because my focus were on my...was on my children, so... We had together-time when I went back to school for my bachelor's. He helped me. He felt that now this was his chance to come back and help his mom, especially everything is now so high-tech. We have quality time where we look over the computer.

We have quality time where we go and visit the museums. We have quality times where I can just ask him questions now about things that I don't understand in terms -- it could be about college, it could be about traveling, it could even be about the weather because he's very very interested in science as well and we just spend a lot of time on that. Now it seems like he's helping me and that when I look back, I see the roles a little bit kind of changing and I'm very proud of that because he focuses on helping me.

It seems as though he knows what he's talking about and very interested in that and we just sit around and talk about that and travel as well. Jarma: And so you can honestly say that you have some really proud moments with... Tonette: Yes. Yes.

Jarma: ...spending time with your child. If you had to summarize this, or just say in your own words, what would you share with other parents about your experience and then being a parent as a teacher, as the first teacher to your child? What kinds of words of wisdom would you share with other parents?

Tonette: Well, I think that's a very good saying: The parents are their child's first teachers and they're not just mere words. You have to stay involved in your child's life, educational-wise, developmental-wise, in all aspects. You have to get into the schools. You have to see what they're being taught. You have to build a rapport with the teachers. You have to meet with the teachers. You just have to stay involved and listen to your children.

Listen to your children, whether it's age starting at two or when they first begin to talk, they know when you are listening to them and it makes a difference what they're saying because they're saying something that they feel is very important and you need to take the time to listen. And ensure them that you are listening to them and communicate.
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