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Jarma Wrihten: Good morning, and thank you for coming out today. Renee Drake: Thank you.

Jarma: I -- I'm very excited to have you here at the Parent's Place at the ECLKC, which is our Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center. We wanted to hear what parents had to say. I definitely want parent perspectives and have you share your story about how you are you child's first and most important teacher. So we'd like to get started in having you share a little bit about the things that you all do together and how you became involved in Head Start.

Renee: Well, my daughter is my youngest of four children, and so I've had some experience both with private and public preschool with the state program, and then finally with Head Start with her. She -- I'm sorry. [Laughs] Jarma: Keep going.

Renee: Okay. She's the youngest of -- like I said -- youngest of four and so she's had us teaching her already at home. However, I knew that, based on past experiences, that she needed more. She needed to be prepared for kindergarten and for her journey through life.

At the time, our circumstances had changed and we weren't financially able to afford private preschool, and I was told about Head Start. And I went ahead and enrolled her -- or went through the process to see if I could get her enrolled, and she was. And immediately upon entering the -- the facility, it was beautiful and it was -- it was so much more than even what my -- the private preschool that I'd paid in the past. The -- the professionalism of the staff, the level of education, their dedication to children, all those things were just everything I had wanted in a preschool.

So we -- we enrolled her and we found out that it wasn't just taking our daughter to preschool. It was a family -- it was a -- it was a family venture. Fortunately, my husband is very involved and we started asking how could we help. How could we get involved? And they were more than willing to put us to work. And we started asking how could we teach her at home, you know, better. They were showing us -- they were giving us information on the different -- things we hadn't really thought about -- ways of learning literacy and math and science...

...and -- and things we hadn't really thought that a three- or a four-year-old was capable of learning. So we took those things home. In -- in our county they -- they made what they called "little backpacks," and in these backpacks were, you know, just a -- a little book and a couple of little, very simple activities. And we would go home and we would work through them with her, sometimes measuring things in -- in a measuring cup, stuff like that.

And it just -- we were just amazed at what she was learning at such a young age, and yet it was -- it was fun for us. It was like we were reliving learning that ourselves, and so we just -- we felt like she was learning but then again, it was -- we were learning right along with her.

Jarma: And that's true. Parents are learning all the time. I mean, I see it every -- in -- I hear it in every conversation when the Head Start teachers are saying, "We want Johnny to learn how to count." And not only are they doing it in the classroom, but it goes right -- and transfers right into the home. But actually, you know, when they say parents are the first teachers, you already have done that job. You've done it at home. It's just them transferring it into the school. Renee: Right.

Jarma: So how do you think that your role now as the parent, and then also being involved -- you both and -- you and your husband both are very involved, is what you said -- how do you think that that has really helped your child's self-esteem and confidence seeing that you are there?

Renee: If you knew Katie [Laughing], you would -- you would know that. She is so bubbly, and she -- she's very

outgoing. She has always had something to say, always had something nice to say. That was something that they taught her in Head Start, and of course, we did at home, too -- was to be polite and -- but to -- to see the best in people, not to focus on negativity, but always to focus on the positive.

And she -- she always was just helping and other children that were struggling a little bit; she'd always go in there and -- and try and pull them in. So her self-esteem has just -- compared to the way I was at the same age or even older, I -- I know that she is in such a better path than I was. Jarma: So pretty much just skyrocketed. Renee: Yes, yes.

Jarma: Because she knows she has your support, both you and dad. Renee: Mm hmm. Jarma: So what advice would you give to other parents that are interested in coming to Head Start or really that are there but maybe not as, you know, outgoing as you and your husband are?

Renee: You know, you have to experience it and, you know, there's the naysayers out there that say, "Oh, I'll teach my own child" and "My child doesn't need to go to preschool; I want to keep them home with me." You know, it -- it's a disservice to... Your child learns social skills, they learn to get along, they learn -- just the simple act of lining up to go outside is -- is a skill, and those things are needed for -- for kindergarten and on up. It's not just about numbers and letters and colors and stuff. But for other parents, check it out.

Take your -- take your child, go visit a site. The bright colors and the friendliness of the staff, I -- and it's a safe place. That is -- that's key is that it's a safe place. You know that your child is safe. If you have to -- if you're working outside the home or even if you're not working outside the home, these people are safe people that your child can model after. That -- they can know that it's okay, that the world can be a safe place. And I would also say that, you know, don't be afraid that you're gonna be looked down upon for seeking out Head Start.

There -- they offer so many services. There are so many things out there. For -- one of my other children is a special-needs child, and if I would have only known about Head Start back when he, you know -- the help I could have received for him that I -- I wasn't able to get. And we're still struggling 12 years later to get him help, and it could have been there. And so -- and even if you're not sure if your child has a special need or not, the teachers, the staff there, they will guide you in that process, as well.

Jarma: Mm hmm. Renee: But it -- it's all there and it -- and it's handed to you. And we're the luckiest parents in the world to have our children in this program.

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