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Lawrence Thomas: I'm the chairperson of the Policy Council of Head Start, Long Island. I'm a single father of three boys, 13, nine, and six. I obtained custody in 2006. That's when I moved to Amityville, New York. And I actually came to Head Start -- I needed help, actually -- excuse me. [Laughs] I needed help. I needed answers. I -- I -- I'm -- I won a custody case after three years in court, back and forth -- very hard situation.

But I was very happy, and happy to this day, that I obtained full custody. Head Start gave me an opportunity to understand what I need to do with my kids, where they can go, what they can learn. I had a four-year-old at the time into Head Start, so I -- I was unaware of a lot of things. So they took me under their wing and -- and really took care of me, listened to my situation, you know, very easy to talk to. Everything was open for me. I had pamphlets, whatever. If I needed information, I had numbers that I can call.

My son now, he's in kindergarten and he's a little more advanced because of Head Start. The program shows him from colors to numbers and he interact with kids much better, and I see the difference between my other two kids never went to Head Start. So I see the difference between the three. I -- I see a big, big difference. Now that -- I wanted to take it further because they helped me and I wanted a turn to give my time to the whole program, to the other kids in the program. People like Maddie Angus, Paul, Diane, Anna, it -- it's -- it's so overwhelming the -- the support that they give, that it's so easy to talk to.

I'm part of the Fatherhood Initiative program, which -- I'm very proud of that. Now, I try to help other fathers to obtain custody or joint custody, or just to let them know their rights as a father that they have. A lot of times we don't know that we have rights, too. I mean, you know, you hear Mother's Day, which is a beautiful thing, but that's so emphasized on. It's like Father's Day, the little tie situation and that's it, it's over. So one thing Maddie Angus used to say, Father's Day is every day. It is very important that a father is in a child's life. I want to raise my boys to men, and that's a -- a full-time job.

Now, my kids are a little older -- 13, nine, and six, as I said -- and I have them in sports, karate, and it's -- you have to be very active with them, whether it's girls or boys. And this program, this Fatherhood program, helps you with the structure of that and what you need to do and -- and signs that you need for -- whether it's abuse or drug abuse or -- or whatever, it -- it -- it gives you that -- the signs to let you know what to do. And -- and if you have some personal problem, I can call at any given time and explain my situation and I will get nothing but honest answers and -- and comfort, you know.

The whole Head Start program offers so much for the kids. When you go up to any center, they -- they -- they welcome you to come in and -- and be a part of everything. They have parent and child when it's just the week -- usually it's the father and the child but, you know, mothers are invited also -- when you paint with your child and -- and you do different activities with your children. We have barbeques at the end of the year, and they -- and they -- and the kids love it.

We had horses come. We had little rides come. This year -- I'm part of Amityville -- this year we have an Elmo come down. It's actually a surprise. Shh. So it -- it -- it's gonna -- it's gonna be wonderful. Wonderful. The kids, it -- it -- it shows them how to be part of a team, you know, and we -- we're going for one goal, and -- and that's to -- to raise our kids. It's -- it's very important, and -- and I'm very proud to be part of the whole program. Thank you.

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