

Lillian Sugarman: All right. Now it is indeed my pleasure to introduce to you Frank Fuentes. Frank is the Deputy Director of the Office of Head Start; and I know you won't believe it when you see how youthful he is, but he has had over 30 years of government work.

And I had the distinct pleasure of working under Frank's direction when he was the deputy Associate Commissioner for the Child Care Bureau. He's worked in many programs in the federal government, including what we call the FYSB, which is the Family and Youth Services Branch, the Child Welfare and Children's Bureau, but his very, very favorite job, I think before he became the deputy of the Office of Head Start at least, was his work with the Migrant Program branch, and that's where Frank's heart is.

He's a real caring person, a family-oriented person and was really proud to work at the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Program branch. And as a matter of fact, he was the first recipient of the Plate of Plenty Award from the Migrant Programs Branch Association. So please join me in welcoming Frank, who will welcome the parent panel that we have. So we appreciate your being here, Frank. Come on up. [Applause]

We've known each other for a very long time.

Frank Fuentes: Because of that I'm going to agree with one thing and disagree with the other. I am prematurely gray; I'm really only 35 years old. [Laughter] And secondly, when Lillian said that she worked for me -- anybody that knows Lillian knows she doesn't work for anybody. [Laughter] It really is a pleasure to have the opportunity to come and see all of you and visit with you this afternoon. Early Head Start and the infants and toddlers we serve and the Migrant and Seasonal Farm Worker program or seasonal migrant Head Start program really are very near and dear to all of our hearts.

And I know you feel that and you live that every single day. What Lillian didn't mention is that I am a father of six, a grandfather of one and a half, [Laughter] and I know, as probably most of you know, that parenting is not an easy task. It's probably one of the most challenging experiences that a human being has in their life regardless of what walk of life they come from. So I applaud all of you. In fact, let me see, how many of you here are parents? Oh. Okay. How many of you are parents who now work in the Early Head Start program? And that, I mean any kind of job. The first one was almost 100 percent.

This one is like 50 percent. That is terrific. I congratulate and applaud all of us. [Applause] Now, knowing that parenting is a tough job, I have to say, and maybe this is going to sound a little chauvinistic, but I hope Walter will back me up. There are aspects of parenting that, perhaps, are a little bit more challenging for men than for women. Just wanted to share a little story. One Saturday afternoon, Johnny comes running in from playing with friends out in the street, and he says to Dad, "Dad, where did I come from?" And Dad is like, "I knew this day would come but I didn't think it would come so soon!"

So he starts out by saying, "Well, son, when a man and a woman meet and they fall in love..." and he begins this tortured explanation of procreation. After he finishes, little Johnny's got this quizzical look on his face and he said, "Johnny, did you understand that?" He said, "No, Dad, all I wanted to know is... Billy comes from Chicago. I just wanted to know where I came from." [Laughter] But as parents, what we want is the best for our kids. And by that we normally use the gauge of "better than what we had." And so I'll share a quick story about my dad. We got our first car in 1956.

And every Saturday morning he would go outside to the sidewalk and pop the hood and start tinkering around. I was about nine or ten. So I come running out. I guess that undoes the fact that I'm only 35,

huh? [Laughter] Gave it away. I did it myself. Alright. So I'd say, "Dad, what are you doing? Let me help." He's messing with the belts and the battery cables and his hands are all dirty. "No, no, Son, I don't want you doing this. I don't want you doing it. I don't want you touching the car this way. I had to earn my way as a teenager as a grease monkey, I don't want you involved in this."

So I interpreted that at that age he doesn't want to take the time, he doesn't want to be bothered. I was a little offended. But as I grew a little older I understood where he was coming from, what the message was. But I have to tell you every time I have to take the car to the mechanic -- [Laughter] -- I really get a little angry with him because they start with, "Well, the consortium plots and the frigmajigs -- and it's going to cost you \$1,500." All right - enough of the stories.

I am particularly glad to be here to show my support and the Office of Head Start support for the Early Head Start parents who are going to share their stories with us today. I'd also like -- well, we did that part. Okay. The importance of recognizing what our panel is going to say this afternoon is that parents are the pillar, are the cornerstone of the Head Start, Early Head Start, Migrant Seasonal Head Start programs. [Applause] The founders of this program back in 1965 identified what were going to be the important components to have a successful and comprehensive child development program.

And there's no question that parent involvement is in fact one of those key elements that make Head Start so successful. The fact that we have for 42 years recognized parents as the first educators of their children has built a powerful and lasting relationship that has benefited the millions of children that have received Head Start services for the rest of their lives. Parents make great contributions. They are involved in the governance. They are especially and importantly involved in the design of the services that children receive.

But I think the greatest contribution that parents make in all of our Head Start programs is that parents and families create a community where each program dwells, and who they are. The languages we speak, particularly the home languages, the culture, the materials, the books, the music, the celebrations and the acknowledgment of the cultures and traditions is what makes our programs so rich. Without the participation of the parents over all of these years, we would not have met our goals, and, quite honestly, I wonder if Head Start would still be here if it weren't for the parents. [Applause]

The relationship that we have between parents and staff is a reciprocal one. Staff learn a great deal by working with the parents, by listening to them, learning what they know about their kids because they are the most knowledgeable about their children. But parents also benefit from that relationship. And we know from the Early Head Start research that there have been positive effects on those parents who receive Early Head Start versus those that don't.

Those that have been part of the Early Head Start experience tend to read more to their children and are more positive and less aggressive in the disciplining of their children than parents who have not received those services. And there are many, many other benefits that have accrued. Our parents on the stage this afternoon have not only survived being parents, but they are in fact thriving as employees of the Early Head Start program. They come to us from as far away as California, Washington State and Richmond, Virginia. Their employment includes front line bus driving -- a job I always wanted --

classroom worker, and, the way into all of our hearts, cooking. I will turn the program over now to Amanda Perez, who I understand did her own star search in order to find these three folks. I know that in the conversation that will ensue, we will learn and appreciate from the experiences that these three

parents have to share with us and I'm going to sit down now and listen to what they have to say and learn as well. Thank you. [Applause]

Amanda Perez: Hello. I am thrilled to be here. I'm thrilled to be here. And I'm especially thrilled to be sitting next to these three parents, Heidi Niebel, Mayra Duarte and Walter Dupree here to share their stories with us today in a very different way, the story, the same story that Dan Siegel shared with us yesterday, and that story had to do with the idea that with very young children, with babies and toddlers, the people who care for them matter.

Parents matter, of course, first and foremost, and then the people that work with parents, families and staff -- those people -- those people matter as well. And so it's very -- it's a wonderful way to celebrate that message to have these three parents who are now working in Early Head Start and Migrant Seasonal Head Start programs here to share their stories with us today. And as we were hearing, there are sort of two sides to that. So there's the side that we know that quality practices really begin with services to families,

and these families will share their stories about how, about their experiences within Head Start programs, sort of how their skills were nurtured and recognized and what that effect had, what the effect of that was on them and on their children. And then the second part of it is parents hired as staff. I did a little research and I looked at the PIR data. And I understand that as a whole with Head Start programs -- did I lose my mic? [Audience: Yes.] Are we there? A lot of-- [Audience: Laughter] you can hear me, though. Is it my hair? Better? Oh, no, this is going to be a problem.

How is that? So the PIR data tells us that 25 percent of staff and programs -- [Laughter] I'm going to face this way. -- of staff and programs are parents that were then hired into programs, and to me that's part of the Standards, of course, but to me the really important and key message in that is that in this work we always -- well, I always talk about relationships. I know that we all do. And parents have a really unique experience and a really unique way of connecting with families and the children in their programs because they've been there. And we're going to hear some of those stories as well here today.

I think it's also important to say, and this was in the title of this session as well, that every member of staff in every program has a role to play in providing quality services. So the people who drive the bus, the people who have their hands on babies, the administrators of programs and the managers of programs all send the message -- and this is the message that Dan Siegel was talking about yesterday--all send that message to babies, to toddlers and to families. I hear you, I understand you, and I am here to respond to you. Whoa, is anybody going to respond to me? Hello? [Laughter]

So we're driving... So I think that this is really is driving that very important message home: that staff have that opportunity and every staff member does have that opportunity. So without further ado we're going to get started and we're going to talk with Heidi Niebel here to my left. I'm going to use my hand for this one. Heidi Niebel is a mom, a bus driver, a cook, a janitor and a teacher's aide in a program in Wenatchee, Washington and we're so very glad to have her with us. Thank you so much for being here today.

Heidi Niebel: Thank you.
[Applause]

Amanda Perez: So tell me about what brought you to Early Head Start in East Wenatchee.

Heidi Niebel: Well, I was 17 and pregnant and in high school still and going to beauty school. And so that was my goal to be a beautician. And later on I had my child while still in school, and I ended up dropping out of beauty school and decided to stay home with my child. When she was 10 months old, she was diagnosed with lingual thyroidism, and that is a condition to where the lingal -- the thyroid actually is implanted on the back of the tongue and it happens in the womb because the thyroid develops on the outside of the baby in the womb and goes down through and is supposed to implant in the bottom of the throat.

But it didn't make it that far, so she had that and I found out actually by her going to the doctor because she was running a fever. And they looked down her throat and the little ball popped up in the back of her throat. They thought it was a cyst. I was scheduled to go to Seattle and get that removed the next day. Well, they took a little biopsy of it and found out it was her thyroid and it was still active, so they kept it there and started her on medication.

And they said that I was lucky to find out about that because it can cause developmental problems later on in life if it's not caught earlier on. Usually they screen for this when the child is born, and it didn't show that when she was born.

Amanda Perez: Wow! So you had some developmental concerns about Shaley, and then you found Early Head Start how?

Heidi Niebel: Actually as a child I attended Head Start and I knew that it was a secure place and helps children learn through their stages of life, and also help with developmentally-challenged children. And I wanted somewhere to where she could be screened, you know, on a regular basis and so I could follow what she was learning and what she needs to learn, and somewhere where I knew that would be a good place to go. And so I started in the home-based program, and then she moved into the Early Head Start program.

Amanda Perez: In the center. And she's six now. And how is she doing?

Heidi Niebel: She's doing good. She's actually going into first grade now. [Applause]

Amanda Perez: Now, we have some pictures of your family.

Heidi Niebel: Shaley is the redhead and Ali, my middle one, she's four. And the little one is my son. He was 10 months in that picture. He's now almost one.

Amanda Perez: Look at those faces! Look at those faces. They're muggers. They're mugging for us. They have a lot of personality. It's so sweet. There's one of the baby, too. What I love about this picture is you can really see how much fun you're having with your baby, with your babies.

Heidi Niebel: They're all happy kids.

Amanda Perez: Yeah-- So you went to Early Head Start because you had concerns about Shaley, originally, but then you had services within Early Head Start. And we talked some about how Early Head Start helped you.

Heidi Niebel: Yes, since I had her I got postpartum depression, which happens to a lot of women and so coming from, graduating from high school I lost contact with all of my friends. And kind of got locked in the house type of thing. So you lost all communication with your friends and by joining this program it

helped me not only-- did it help my child but it helped me in becoming a stronger person and -- because they did the volunteer program trying to involve the parents and...

Amanda Perez: You were really active in that program?

Heidi Niebel: Yeah, they really encouraged me to go and it was fun. And eventually I lived close by to a Head Start center so I could just walk down. I was only two minutes away so...

Amanda Perez: You got it all, convenience, good services.

Heidi Niebel: And they always made me feel very welcome.

Amanda Perez: That's very good. And so you spent a lot of time volunteering in that program. And how did you come to be hired there?

Heidi Niebel: Well, I was an at-home mom and I was looking in the newspaper, because I was thinking of starting to work, and I seen that Head Start was hiring. So I talked to a couple of teachers about a bus driving position, and one of the teachers said that I should go for it and try and apply. And I tried for it and I started talking my CDL classes to get my license. And since I was in the process, I didn't actually have it, I got the interview but I didn't actually get in then. It was the following fall when I actually got the job, but it was for a different job title. It was for a janitor position, but it still got me in there.

Amanda Perez: That's great.

Heidi Niebel: So the first month of working as a janitor at Head Start, the position for the bus driver actually came open again, and that's what I really wanted to do. And so I finished my CDL and I applied for that position and I got it.

[Applause]

Amanda Perez: Persistence. And we have a picture. -- we didn't talk about this but this is your family advocate who came to work for you.

Heidi Niebel: Yes, she's been my family advocate since I started.

Amanda Perez: Tell me a little bit about her.

Heidi Niebel: We're really close. And sorry, guys. [Applause] She recently is going...found out that she has breast cancer. And she's going through chemo, and she's now doing radiation. She is doing very well. She came to work through it all, even through chemo when she was really sick. She's very dedicated to her job. And a lot of people look up to her and I'm very proud of how she would rather serve her families than sit at home and feel sick.

Amanda Perez: Yeah. I think you and I had sort of a conversation about how she really made a commitment to do this and that when you saw that it sort of gave you a lot of confidence about sort of your own ability to be persistent and to try for the job you really wanted and to get your CDL license and it's a wonderful model.

Heidi Niebel: Yes, she is a great role model and I want to be just like her and she's a very supportive person, even when she was down, you know.

Amanda Perez: Let's talk for a minute about the bus. Let's see the bus picture. I know we have a bus picture. There it is. That's triumph. That's the face of triumph there.

Heidi Niebel: Yes.

Amanda Perez: Now, four jobs in one. That's kind of big. That's kind of big. So and I think what you really emphasize here is our point that every job within the program is really important, and you do many of those jobs. What do you like about that?

Heidi Niebel: I like the contact with the children and getting to learn with them and being able to enjoy my days at work. It's very encouraging to come back to work each day, because you know that that child, you know certain children or all the children, just seeing them all play together and learn, it's very fun.

Amanda Perez: And I know you make it more fun by being there, for sure.

Heidi Niebel: Well not to mention that my child goes there, but -- [Laughter]

Amanda Perez: Tell me what that's like having your child going to school. What kinds of things --? How does that impact you and your child to see you working in that way?

Heidi Niebel: I think that it's very encouraging for my child, because she gets to see me at home and then she gets to see me at work and also in her own environment there at school. So she sees that I'm involved in every aspect of her life.

Amanda Perez: And that can certainly give her confidence as well as she goes forward. You told me that, sort of, the job search and trying to kind of get in a little bit was very up and down for you and then you were trying a lot of things that you hadn't tried before. And you said to me, I just want to quote you -- I'm going to quote you. It says, "I'm trying everything and things that I thought I couldn't do, I can." And I thought that was such a nice message, not just for you but for the kids that you're working with.

You told me that you always want children to have a sense that they can do things, the way that you learned. And I think that you encourage them through your example as well as through the way you work with them. I wanted you to tell us the story about Shaley and what Shaley wants to be when she grows up.

Heidi Niebel: Well Shaley sees that I'm a mother that has three children, so she claims that she wants to have four children. [Laughter] The number keeps getting higher each time we talk about it. But on top of that she wants to have three jobs. She wants to work at the movie theater, the dentist office and McDonald's. [Laughter]

Amanda Perez: And I think that is such a testament to you, really, that she wants to do all those things, that she has a sense that she can do them. I think that's a wonderful way to end your story. Thank you so much.

[Applause]

And next to Heidi is Mayra Duarte from the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start program in Merced, California. And, you're a permanent teacher there. We're so glad to have you thank you so much for being here. We have some pictures of your family as well, Mayra, and I know those are going to go up on the screen very soon. [Laughter] So who's here?

Mayra Duarte: This is my husband Filberto, my oldest son, quite a young man, Junior, and David, the youngest. He's eight years old.

Amanda Perez: Very nice. And I think we have another picture after this, of some other members of your family.

[Laughter] Tell me a little bit about these pictures.

Mayra Duarte: Sharkie is our cat. Well actually -- I'm sorry, Sharkie is really David's cat. He loves it very much. He's very dedicated to his cat. He's always looking for ways to make sure that Sharkie isn't missing anything. He tries to make Sharkie feel at home. Fussy is Junior's dog. Junior is very responsible toward his dog. When Junior became 13 this year he asked for a pet.

He didn't want just any dog. He wanted a dog taken from the pen, from the area where they take dogs who nobody loves anymore and are going to be put to death. I decided to please him because he's a very good student. He's very responsible, he gets very good grades at school. That's why I thought that it was a good idea to do what he wanted.

Amanda Perez: Well it's interesting, one of the things that Dan Siegel was talking about yesterday was that parents that are sort of in touch with their histories are really sort of -- that attachment with their children is stronger. So it's interesting to hear this story because these are kids that are very in touch with the fact, it seems that they've cared for and taken care of so it's very lovely, I think. You got involved with Head Start when Junior was two years old. Right? Can you talk a little bit about how you heard about Head Start?

Mayra Duarte: I worked in the agricultural field. And I heard about this wonderful program when I was working in the fields. I really was quite desperate looking for some sort of day-care arrangement, because we would leave Junior with neighbors. And often the neighbors didn't want to care for him, because I work from 5:00 in the morning until 5:00 in the afternoon. And Junior also experienced separation anxiety. It was hard to find day care for Junior because he cried -- he wanted his father and his mother. There was insecurity. We were a migrant family.

We came from another country, we went from town to town, from job to job. So this made it very hard for him and for us as a family. That's why I decided to find out more about the program and let them know that we needed them for Junior's stability.

Amanda Perez: And you told me that when you went into this program that the receptionist there spoke Spanish to you. Tell me a little bit about what that felt like.

Mayra Duarte: It was marvelous to be able to hear that voice speaking Spanish. I felt like I was back home in Guatemala, because I heard that Spanish voice. She told me all about the program in every great detail in Spanish. She gave me copies of the documentation I need to fill out. It was in Spanish. I took it home and found all the information there. I went back to the program and she told me that we indeed qualified, being a migrant family with low income. That was great to know, because inside I knew that they would take good care of my treasure.

It made me feel wonderful to know that there are programs in the United States where you can speak Spanish. Especially, because I just arrived in the United States, I didn't know anything about the community. I was an immigrant. It was wonderful.

Amanda Perez: And now when you started that program, you didn't -- you weren't thinking about child development as sort of your path in the way you wanted to go. So how did you get there?

Mayra Duarte: Once Junior was registered in the program, the teachers conducted regular observations and they invited me, the teacher invited me to discuss them with her. We decided that it was time to plan the individual plan based on his own needs. He still cried a lot because of being separated. So I

realized that she knew what she was doing. I started getting the feeling that while Junior was there I really liked what they were doing. So I started getting more involved in the program on the days where there was no work, because that's the way it works in agriculture, some days you have work, some days you do not.

So I decided to get more involved in parent meetings after receiving several invitations because in the beginning I refused the invitations. We came back the second year. They realized that I was a very active mother. And they realized that I was very interested in learning from the program, and the other parents then decided that I should be their representative as president of the Parents Association. [Applause]

It was a great achievement, and I let them know that I was going to be very observant and I was going to take care to make sure that their needs were met at the center.

That's the way it worked. I came to the agency. The agency decided that I had the potential to be the president. So that's how I became president to the agency. I was sent to the grantee. They realized that I had the potential, that I was an active mother and that I could bring to them the voice of the migrant families. And they decided that I could be the secretary of the Parents Council. That's how it worked.

I always tried to advocate for the rights of parents and the children, and bring to the center everything I learned at Head Start and let them know that Head Start does indeed do everything it can for us migrants; that our children are very valuable to them; that we also are worthy of confidence and trust in the United States. [Applause] That improved my self-esteem. I knew that I could do it. Because I was bringing the voice of the center to all these big places and back from the big places to the center. That's how I became involved in Head Start. [Applause]

Amanda Perez: I have to interrupt the story for just a minute. There's been an emergency with Stella. The Coburns. Hello -- would Stella Lee Coburn please call 9052, if you're here, please call that number. I'm sorry. I'm sorry to interrupt. Okay. And Mayra, so you started taking classes to move. Tell me a little bit about the classes that you took.

Mayra Duarte: Classes in English as a second language were offered through Head Start. And it covered the first 12 units for the associate teachers permit. In 1999, thanks to the support of everybody at the center, I decided to register. In 2000, I finished with the first 12 units. And I realized that indeed, this is what I truly liked. That's when I had to talk to my husband in earnest. And I said, "This is what I like, I want to register in a community college as a full-time student." He said, "It's okay- you can drop the work, the job in agriculture - I will support you." [Applause]

I did it, and Head Start and us put together a partnership agreement. I set for myself the goal of getting an AA degree in early childhood education by 2003. In 2000 I didn't know any English. By 2003, I accomplished it. I got my AA degree. [Applause] By then the Office of Education in my county gave me the opportunity of working as a teacher in the classroom. I have four children under me -- in my care.

In 2006, another opportunity arose by which I could apply to the teacher position. Now I have eight children in my care. For four of them, I'm the primary caregiver. And my associate teacher is the primary caregiver for the other four. That's how I got involved in Head Start, and that's how I am now working for Head Start and giving the best for my families.

[Applause]

Amanda Perez: I just have to say this, Mayra was very kind to me and let us do all the planning that we did for this in English, which I really appreciated it, and her English is absolutely beautiful. But when I asked her whether she wanted to speak in Spanish or English for this session, she said to me "I'm passionate about Head Start and I want to speak about Head Start in a language of passion." [Applause] So Mayra, what do you like about your job?

Mayra Duarte: I like my families to know that I'm there for their children. I have spent time in their shoes and now here I am in front of you. I want them to know if I could do it, we all can. In this country, opportunity is open to everyone. I like to support the children in their emotional -- in their emotions, in their education and everything that's basic that we all know about. But especially to let them know that it can be done; that I love them, that they should love themselves because we're all important; we all matter in this country and in this world.

We are all individuals. We all should know that we can do it. And with the help of the others, everything is possible. [Applause]

Amanda Perez: How has being a parent helped you with the work that you're doing now with Migrant and Seasonal Head Start?

Mayra Duarte: It's good to know that when you need daycare there's somebody out there who will care for your child -- that they do it with their heart and that you really care for and that's what you're there for. I would like to let them know that they're not alone. And just as I support them, I was supported one day. [Applause]

Amanda Perez: And I think that really emphasizes, for us, another point about why it's so helpful to have families that are hired in. And really has to do with the level of commitment very often that we see with families hired in. Now you're enrolling in school again. Tell us a little about that.

Mayra Duarte: My next goal is to attend the Fresno State University. I have been accepted. I will start in August, [Applause] and with everybody's help, I plan to get my Bachelor's degree in 2010. [Applause] Education is very important for everyone. And I always try to emphasize to my children that with education things are easier. Without education, it's much tougher, and they are the future. Thank you.

[Applause]

Amanda Perez: Thank you so much. And I think that it's an example of really what happens when the passion that you have for Head Start really meets the education. And you're growing and you're growing. I think you have 900 people in the audience that are cheering you on for that 2010 deadline so... Finally on our panel we have Walter Dupree, and he's a father and a teacher's aide from Child Development Resources Early Head Start in Williamsburg, Virginia. Walter, thank you so much, too, for being here.

Walter Dupree: Thank you.

Amanda Perez: We have pictures of your family, too, of course and we're going to begin I believe with Amir.

Walter Dupree: I'm a tear box - y'all have got to bear with me. I love my children.

Amanda Perez: Who is this?

Walter Dupree: We have Amir with his Buzz Lightyear toy and then we have Tanya in her ladybug costume.

Amanda Perez: Who is that there?

Walter Dupree: That's Akira, that's the youngest girl, she's three. Yeah...she's big. And that is my wife Candace and my last son, Terrell, he's eight months this month. And he's in the seventieth percentile. He's a big boy. [Laughter]

Amanda Perez: How tall is your cousin you were telling me?

Walter Dupree: I have a cousin that's about 7'4" or something like that. I have tall people in the family, we both do, and so they're going to get it some way. I didn't get it so they can get it.

Amanda Perez: I think we have one last picture of your family. There they are. I love the costume.

Walter Dupree: Oh, yeah, all day. You should see some of the things Daddy has to wear. [Laughter]

Amanda Perez: So you got involved with Early Head Start when Amir was two, right, and Tanya was a few months old. What brought you to Early Head Start?

Walter Dupree: Well, I was an at home dad for about two years, maybe a little bit over. It was a hard decision because I'm a worker. I build computers, and dabble in every other thing, and so I stayed home with them. I'm also a nurturer -- I love children. I come from a broken home so I didn't have that when I was younger, and I remember it firsthand, and I can't do it to my children at all. Once I had my first son it was time for me to grow up and do things and be a father that I didn't have. [Applause]

Of course, not to disrespect my dad in any way, because he was there, but he was a worker, you understand? He didn't understand the need to hug us and throw us and love us like that. He provided and that's what he did. He did a wonderful job in that as long as he did it. And I'm proud of him, but I just remember things that I didn't have that I wanted to give my children.

Amanda Perez: And so you were going back to work after staying at home with them.

Walter Dupree: Well, that was kind of -- I was searching. Of course, I was doing my computers the whole time. But I was searching -- construction, other things. If anybody knows any type of construction, I was green. That means I'm new to the game. Ain't nobody want to hire me for it. And we enrolled the kids in a school and they were there for a couple of months, and the family consultant, she was hounding me. "When are you going to work, when are you going to do this and that?" You know and I just -- I had nowhere else to go really, and when I enrolled my kids in the program, a few months into the program, I was an active parent in the program.

I had to be there. If you are with your kids from day one and you have them, you have to be around them, and there's no other way around it. So I was there about every day. [Laughter] What did me well was the other children who might not have had a dad or whose dad worked, from the first day I stepped into the classroom they accepted me and they wrapped their little arms around me and knocked me down and climbed all over me and that's what got me. I was hooked from there. And amongst going every day and playing with the kids and, even though I wasn't an employee of the program, they had to learn things, you understand?

So I would teach them things and play and do dad things, and my boss at the time, Mattie Haskell, said I had a skill that I needed to nurture and that I was a nurturer, and that I should be a sub. And I started subbing and subbing and subbing. [Laughter] She said, you know, what you need to be a permanent sub.

[Laughter] So I was there every day any way. So she made me a part of the permanent sub. And doing anything I can. I like to be flexible for the kids. They need you any way they need you. Whether they need you there or whether they need you to do something, they need you. And I was that flexible person.

And she said, you know what, we're going to hire you as not a sub, but as staff. You have more skills than you know. [Applause] And it was all based on what I thought I didn't have at a younger age. I'm from Brooklyn, New York. I'm from Brook-Nam, they called it, you know, it's a war zone. And so I guess they never -- and even I never thought that I would have those skills or qualities. And they pointed it out to me a lot, a whole lot.

Amanda Perez: That you, when you went into that classroom, that you were a nurturer and that you were taking care of those kids, and you said that was something that you didn't really recognize growing up?

Walter Dupree: Yes, like I said my dad worked. My mom worked. They both worked like two jobs, and we were there and being taken care of by other people and we were outside a lot. I don't go outside much anymore. I'm an in-house person because of what I've experienced. And it just pulled me -- children, they have a way of getting to you, and getting into your soul. And that's what they did. And I needed them just as much as they needed me.

You know? It was just beautiful for me to see such a program active, because I've never seen a program active as that, and especially in younger children. And I love younger children. They have so many things to learn. I just love them to death.

Amanda Perez: Can you say what you mean by "active"?

Walter Dupree: I wasn't used to, as I learned from being on parent panels, because as soon as I got in the school I was a panelist or policy council, things like that. And with zero to three, those were the kind of years that I thought that you left the kids to explore on their own, and I never saw such a team go at children like the school did, and just support them in every way. It's family-style. It's in every way we're a family in the classroom. And to promote the learning that they do in the way they do it, and just caring for them. Just they're learning and ABCs start for me when you start school.

You start five years old in school, maybe pre-K, that's when you start to learn, that's when you become active. But they had babies at circle time, you know? So -- [Laughter]

Amanda Perez: Learning.

Walter Dupree: Yeah, learning.

Amanda Perez: Now, you went to Early Head Start because you wanted to put your kids in class and then you stayed and stayed. Tell me a little bit about what you got out of that experience with having the kids in the classroom.

Walter Dupree: Love. Just children at that age, they're so real. They're not faking anything. They love you. Those little arms and little legs hugging and pulling and tugging at you. Like I said, they need you, and they need guys -- I've noticed that from the beginning. [Applause] And they praise me so much, and I was like -- I'm not that type of person to take praise and things like that. And they were like, "You're doing good and just stick in there and I know it's hard." I'm like, "I'm just playing!" [Laughter]

Amanda Perez: And you got very involved, as you said, with the program and fatherhood piece of it and those kinds of things. Can you describe some of those activities?

Walter Dupree: Okay. Well, in the classroom we do everything. I mean, when they get there, we have family-style dining. Teach them their ABCs, all day we're singing, all day we're involved and then comes the fathership part to it. "We're recruiting so you guys gotta come on and stop playing -- stop and come play -- you'll get hooked, I'm telling you. Come on."

[Applause]

And just facilitating fathership meetings and trying to pull the teeth of these fathers and with me, and being from where I'm from and being blessed to age very well. I'm almost 30, you guys. Aging very well. [Laughter] I was able to pull those at-risk fathers, and even if it was just for a little while, so they can see what they're missing-- just to get them in for a while. We have a group-- it's joint with James City County, Williamsburg and York County Head Start called M.A.C., Men Advocating for Children and I just feel that a lot of children go through things that they don't have to or see things that they shouldn't have to.

So I've become an advocate for that because I was one of those kids that went through what I shouldn't have to, and saw what I shouldn't have to. And I remember it at firsthand, and when people get older they tend to forget these things, or like the doctor said the other day, they push it back and block it. I didn't have anything to block it. I wasn't trying to block it. When it came out, and I can give it to the kids in a positive way, it was good. [Applause] And they just loved me for it. We facilitate events, big events. We had a hoop-a-thon to get the guys out and interested.

M.A.C. meeting, about last year we got a big grill so we could go out back and throw the steaks on there and just have a good time, and facilitate positive fathership. And in the family setting, of course, but to just to get the guys involved in being involved in their children's life. Not taking anything away from the moms, but when Mom's there, Dad is going to sit down and let Mom do the teaching and the learning, you know, and we just wanted the guys to get out and get a piece of what I got and see how special the kids were.

I've been through -- since then I've started going to the Region 3 Head Start fathership meetings and conferences and learning so much more about life and about just everything that I can bring to the classrooms and I can bring home as a father.

Amanda Perez: Walter, it's interesting, because you and I have been talking for a couple of months now. And for months, I've been trying to get you to talk with me about sort of, what happened when you weren't in a leadership position at CDR. And it turns out that I think you were always in a leadership position at CDR.

Walter Dupree: They kind of put me at different roles. Of course, being the only guy that was in the building for Early Head Start, because we had guys in Head Start. I was fixing, lifting, emptying out trash. However, I had-- I had-- I was blessed to -- when we didn't have enough staffing and we needed somebody without credentials to be a lead teacher and to experience that and to gain skill with that, which was just beautiful, and the experience -- it just took me places. It gave me a happy place to go to. And just all types of roles. And I'm a positive role model for -- like I said some kids they don't have it.

And they need it. They need a guy to show them what's what. You know? How to respect, how to walk tall. How to feel like you're not little, because I felt little and unheard. I told you I was a tear box. But a lot of people, they don't pay attention to the needs of children because they're children. And you just gotta know that they have the same feelings as we do. They just can't express them. And you gotta help them to express those feelings and to learn how to express those feelings positively. Now, they're going to be kids and they're going to do what they do.

But there's a way of doing everything, of teaching them and being nonjudgmental because of their ways. It's just a wonderful experience to have, and a wonderful thing to be a part of.

Amanda Perez: Now we have some pictures of you with these kids.

Walter Dupree: Those are my babies. [Laughter] We were running, we were racing.

Heidi Niebel: Looks like you were really into it.

Walter Dupree: Oh, yeah. I play hard.

Amanda Perez: So who won?

Walter Dupree: They won. They always win. There are two other children. One, she was -- she just wanted to be held so -- That was it. But, the other child, we brush at the sink, and we teach proper brushing, and we sing and just bond, basically.

Amanda Perez: Now, Walter you told the story about Mattie Haskell, he was the director at your program, seeing in you sort of nurturing, this drive to be with children since you were in the classroom every day. What do you like about your job?

Walter Dupree: Well, firsthand, and it was a selfish reason, but as I learned more and got more into it I got more into the kids. I wanted to be a better dad, and I wanted to learn how to be a better dad for my kids. And what I loved about it was that as being an employee, I got to be around my kids all day, just playing and doing what they needed to do. But I was in each one of their classrooms at a given time for extended periods, so I had firsthand in learning how to care for those kids in different ways and my kids, and in their education. I played firsthand in it.

If anyone has ever worked in a center and been able to teach your own children those basics before you thought they were basics -- before those children -- before you felt your children were supposed to learn them -- they were learning them and thriving. Not just learning, but thriving with their little personalities, and just the art, and the reading at circle time. And I've had my friends tell me, because we're family. I would say I have my sisters tell me, you know? No matter how much attention my children wanted, all of those children in the classroom were my children. So I treated them all equally. When Daddy was at work, Daddy was at work.

Whether work was playing or reading or changing diapers, Daddy was at work. And I had to tell my kids, "Daddy is at work now. He'll play with you but he's at work. I can't hold you all day, baby." And all of them have been through the program and through Head Start. Akira was the last one and Terrell -- he's been in there since he was six weeks. I'm not in his classroom, but I can go right down the hall and pay him a visit.

Amanda Perez: And that's huge, that's a huge benefit of working in the center, of course. Tell me something about your relationship with the families that you serve.

Walter Dupree: I can relate directly to them. I know some of the struggles. I know some of the feelings. I know when a home visitor comes, and you're like, "Oh, this person is invading my space." [Laughter]

Because you don't understand what they're doing, and now I can understand this invasion wasn't an invasion, because it helped me be who I am. If she hadn't, or if they hadn't come into my territory, I would not have been the person I am.

And I would have not been in the classroom. It's a possibility I would have been, but if they didn't nag and care for us -- [Laughter] It's good nagging. Don't get me wrong. It's good nagging. It's just being at risk, you don't know it's good nagging. [Laughter] You just -- Like I know what it's all about. I know that it was family-centered instead of individual-centered, you know? We wanted to make sure it was a family all around instead of just my children and even though they didn't know me, they cared for me, like I was a baby, you know? And I'm very grateful and thankful.

Amanda Perez: And that's the same thing you now provide.

Walter Dupree: Yeah, it's the same thing I do now. I just care for them. If you love kids, you love kids.

Amanda Perez: So we actually have a poem that Walter wrote for his daughter Akira. And I have asked him if he would read it.

Walter Dupree: Somebody gotta turn the AC down because it's dripping in my eyes. [Laughter] But you guys gotta bear with me. There are typos which I never changed because the feeling was a feeling, you know, and as long as the message is clear. And these are -- I started the week before my daughter Akira was born. So within three months, it was a rapid change, internally, within a way that I thought about children and communication and how they communicate. So I'm going to start.

I have a three-month-old daughter who spoke to me today. I know it sounds strange, but I swear it's true. She told me to hold her. She told me she wanted to be happy. She told me she wanted to feel safe, and in my arms she was. She told me she wanted to feel protected and away from all harm. She told me to love her unconditionally, and asked me to be there always. She said that once I picked her up, to never let her go. The last thing she told me was she wanted to gaze into my eyes forever, and when forever ended she would still be there staring. So I made a promise to always be there for her, rain, sleet or snow.

I'm a New Yorker, I don't like snow. So -- she will always be my baby girl. I promise I will keep her safe, away from all harm. She's a part of me, and I told her I would do a million years in purgatory to save her from one frown. I told her my heart was hers forever, and once I picked her up, I would never let go. Even when my arms turned to ash, I would still be holding onto her. As I held her, I told her I loved her. She smiled.

As I tell you this, and I know you don't believe me, again I swear she told me, as she can't use words or even simple gestures, she told me with her heart. I read it through her eyes. Before she stopped talking, she said, Daddy, I love you, and closed her eyes and smiled. As she slept I told her I loved her again. A smile appeared on her face as if she heard me. And that's it. [Applause]

Amanda Perez: I think Walter's poem is such a wonderful way to conclude. I think it's a really lovely reminder, not only for a father's love for his daughter, but the importance-- the importance of the responsiveness (I'm going to cry) and the communication you're talking about. When Akira signals, Walter responds. And when she communicates, he understands. And each time he does she builds a sense that she's important and her world is safe. Parents matter.

I think that we've also heard from everyone here today is that every member of the staff has an opportunity to provide that responsiveness and communication and to develop a community of support and security for children and families. In all the work you do, in all the people you serve, in the many, many ways you respond you communicate respect and value. You drive that message home. Staff matter. I want to thank you so much for being here today and especially thank you to the panelists.
[Applause]

-- End of Video --