

**2011 Leadership Institute:
George Sheldon**

George Sheldon: Basically, what you just heard was my resume, which basically tells you I can't hold a job.

[Crowd laughs]

No, it's good to be with you. I, I appreciate that. I want to thank Colleen, and Ann, and, and Yvette, and all the Head Start employees. You know, as, as-- When I was secretary of the Department of Children and Families in Florida, we had 13,000 employees. And, what I used to tell people is as secretary, I didn't do anything. I didn't process food stamps. I didn't counsel people in mental institutions. I didn't do protective investigation. It was the 13,000 people in that agency who did that every day, and they didn't make a whole hell of a lot of money doing it. But in reality, it's the employees of this department are the same way. They are working tirelessly on your behalf to really move Head Start forward. But it's also true about you. You are the essence of what Head Start is about. I, I've visited some programs throughout the country, most recently in California, and, and, and every time you get a little discouraged here in D.C., I encourage you to go out and visit a Head Start program.

[Applause]

Because what you really see are young kids who are getting an opportunity to realize their full potential. I remember seeing some kids who were so enthusiastic about learning and what they could learn. Frankly, every child in this nation is born with a curiosity. It's the reason a child will reach out to touch a hot stove. You can tell them all day long, "It's hot," but that's curiosity. And, that curiosity is the essence of learning. And, if that curiosity is not developed and encouraged during the first five years of life, it's very, very difficult to gain that curiosity back, and you struggle with that. There have been better times to be assistant secretary of Children and Families.

[Crowd laughs]

You know, I would love to have been assistant secretary in the '90s, in the early 2000s, when we were flush with money, but frankly, these are our times, and we have an opportunity to make the best of them. When I came to the department, about four months ago, my deputy in Florida told me that Washington was 78 square miles surrounded by reality.

[Crowd laughs]

And I encourage you to stay in D.C. a little while, and you'll understand that definition. But, I really want to say how much I appreciate you being here and how important I think this conference is. Every day you strive to make kids who have suffered enormous setbacks, enormous economic and social challenges, you make sure that those kids are healthy, they're well-educated, that they're nurtured, that they're prepared for all the tough things they ultimately will find in adulthood. You don't only talk the

talk, you walk the walk. As parents, as Head Start staff, as federal contractors, as education managers, you really are the leaders of today, who are really training the leaders of tomorrow. You know, I sometimes think we hear that and, and we see that as a platitude, but it is a reality. If we do not capture this upcoming generation, then we cannot guarantee the same kind of way of life I think all of us have known. So, I really come to thank you for your dedication and your commitment, and I also am pleased to be part of this administration, which is equally committed to early childhood development and early childhood education. The administration is engaged in what I think is a comprehensive approach to early childhood development. It means improving. It means building on the s-- on the found-- the sound foundation that already exists. It means developing programs from pregnancy through child care, through early childhood education, up through kindergarten. We're working closely with the Department of Education, and I think you've seen now that we have a new high-level position at the Department of Health and Human Services focused exclusively on early childhood education and early childhood development, and those are so critically tied together. You know, I see my job at the Administration for Children and Families as eliminating the need for it in the first place. And what makes children and families vulnerable? It's really two things. It's health care and it's education. You give vulnerable children and families access to health care and education, and you have laid the foundation for the rest of their development, the rest of their lives. You know that at Head Start.

[Applause]

It's the reason th-- it's the reason the president and Secretary Sebelius rolled out and gained congressional approval for the Race to the Top in early childhood, to really say to the states, "You need to plan better. You need to really integrate what you're doing in, in early childhood education with child care, with Head Start, with all of the elements leading into kindergarten, and to develop comprehensive plans." It's a half a billion dollars. Now in reality, when you look at a nation this large, that's not a whole lot of money. Numbers are bigger up here than they were in Florida. But, it is an important challenge to the states to step up their game, to really say that no child-- we've got to make that slogan "No Child Left Behind" a reality, not just a bumper-sticker mentality.

[Applause]

But as we, we really look to additional supports in the early childhood arena, we also recognize that we've got to be dedicated to one of the oldest programs in the country that's making a difference, and that's Head Start. We not only want to uphold the reputation of Head Start, and I think we're doing it, but in these challenging times, when everybody is a pundit, we've got to be willing to say that yes, Head Start is competitive, we can compete, and we can raise the bar even in our own programs.

[Applause]

Now, now admittedly, reform is challenging, it's difficult. As a former associate dean of a law school, we went through re-accreditation every seven years, and trust me, it was painful. But it forced us as a law school to reevaluate what we were doing, to look deeply at strategically how do we improve what we're doing, although we were doing a good job, but it raised the bar, and I really think that's something that we can do internally, and I think you're up to the task. We rolled out recently a comp-- a new

competition draft rule, received over 16,000 comments. It really showed that you all are concerned about what that is, but it also shows the depth of your commitment. And, reviewing those comments, I think effectively, the Department, the, the Administration for Children and Families, the Office of Head Start, has learned from those comments. Now, will the final rule be everything you want? I doubt it. May not be everything I want. But, I think it is an effort to say, "We're going to work with you, we're going to listen to you." I met yesterday morning with your leadership and, frankly, learned a lot about what we ought to be focusing on, and how we ought to be proceeding. That's because Head Start is probably the best possible launching pad for low-income children in terms of providing for those families, recognizing it is both a shared responsibility and an investment in our shared future. Frederick Douglass once said, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair a broken man." And, as leaders of Head Start and communities throughout this country, you are really demonstrating the wisdom of those words. We are relying, and I personally intend to rely, on your partnership, the strength and integrity of Head Start programs everywhere. Because after 50 years, you've proven that the Head Start model works. It's impacting kids, and even the impact study that everybody kind of talks about, if you really look at it, what it says is that children in Head Start are better prepared going into kindergarten than children who don't receive that effort.

[Applause]

Four-year-olds had higher language and literacy skills and were in better health. The time has come to stop apologizing and to start talking about your successes.

[Applause]

But, as we move towards this re-designation rule, I recognize that everything can't be done at the federal level. That really, the innovation, the breakthroughs, are already happening in the field. You're learning things from each other, you're learning them here. You're going way beyond the call of duty for these children; you're helping families capitalize on their strengths, and climb out of a chasm of disadvantage. I read recently about a Head Start home visitor named Isabelle. She was working for a family in Minnesota whose four-year-old daughter had been battling serious medical challenges since birth, and those had gone untreated because the family didn't have the resources. So what did Isabelle do? She plunged right in. She arranged for the child to see a doctor. The child was evaluated for speech services. She got her eyes examined. A local optometrist donated glasses. A dentist gave a free exam, sponsored by another program that will give her ongoing dental care, something many children lack. And, I think it's important to recognize that it is very difficult for a child who gets to the second grade to be diagnosed as a slow learner solely because that individual child hadn't had her eyes checked. Or, we can't say that a child who hasn't had her dent-- her, her teeth cared for can, can actually learn if they've got a substantial tooth problem. It's not rocket science. It's reality as we deal with that. But Isabelle didn't just stop there. She walked the family through the paperwork. She got emergency medical coverage, and soon the strongest hospital in Chicago arranged to fly the family out, pay for their accommodations, and the little girl underwent surgery. But Isabelle still didn't stop. She recognized that the family's home was cold, and it was unstable. She got the family to work making calls, completing applications for housing assistance and support for heating bills in a cold Minnesota winter. Today, this

child and family have new windows and doors, a new furnace, a working hot-water heater, a new stove, and Isabelle helped them get an electrician who would provide the electrical work at a cost they could afford. It was through Isabelle's passionate work that that family was helped. She became that family's champion. This is a working family, as is so often the case with the families you serve. They just needed a little support, a little guidance, a little encouragement, from someone who knew the system. It isn't enough for help to be out there if people can't find it and be able to access it. If Head Start and Isabelle had not come along, that family would've ended up sick, separated, maybe homeless, and maybe even worse. Instead they're warm, they're healthy, they're secure. That's really what Head Start is all about, and each one of you could tell stories similar to Isabelle's, because you do it, you perform it. There's so many wonderful stories like that, of Head Start students who went off to get advanced degrees, of adults who got certified in early childhood development and built careers at Head Start, of families who benefited from parenting education and medical services. These are the stories that are the real reason you do what you do. When you get discouraged, think of those as emblems of success. Every time I get a little depressed about Washington, I get out of town, and I visit either an unaccompanied migrant children's program or a Head Start program, and see the work that we're really doing. You know, the great thing about children is how much they're still hopeful and excited about life. Ann said that we faced the response to the earthquake in Haiti in Florida, and in a period of 30 days repatriated about 27,000 U.S. citizens and their dependents, about 600 adopted children, and about 600 or 700 medical evacuees. Florida stepped up to the plate, as did HHS. You remember back then, everybody wanted to adopt a Haitian child. As a matter of fact, I told the governor one day that I thought by executive order he ought to declare every child in foster care Haitian just for the period of that time.

[Crowd laughs]

But, I want to tell a story about a little girl who was found three days after the quake. She was pulled from the quake with barely a pulse and removed from a deceased woman, who we assumed to be her mother. And because of the caring Americans who were there, she was taken to a field hospital, and, and they said at that hospital that if this child doesn't get to a real hospital, she wouldn't make it. And, they put her in a taxi and drove to Port-au-Prince Airport, where they would -- where they had C-17s that were evacuating. And, a taxi driver took baby Jenny and rushed her to a young lieutenant, and said, "This child needs to get on this plane." This is the only, you see, two-month-old child, the only child admitted to this nation at that time without State Department approval. Initially, the order was a removal order when she arrived, but luckily, saner heads prevailed. Well, baby Jenny not only -- she had a crushed skull, crushed ribs, crushed arms, but what Jackson Memorial did to save that little girl was amazing. And then a month later, a young woman in Port-au-Prince saw a picture of baby Jenny, and said, "That's my daughter." And through DNA samples, we actually proved that to be the case, and we were able to reunite that family. Those are the stories of people caring for people and people who think that every child's life is important and makes a difference. I want to close with a brief word about the Head Start parents in the room, because this program was founded on the principles that parents are the first and most important teacher of their children.

[Applause]

I met yesterday morning with your leadership, and a young Head Start parent reminded me of the critical role parents play, and it was a good message, because, quite frankly, no institution -- not a school, not a church, not even Head Start -- can replace parents in the formation and development of the character of their own children.

[Applause]

So to parents, I say the work you do at home, the conversations you have with your kids in the car, at the store, and even when they're babies, are more important than anything any of the rest of us can do for that child. Beyond that, the perspective that you have added to Head Start, being on work groups and policy developments, this program truly wouldn't work if it weren't for the dedication of Head Start parents.

[Applause]

So I, I thank you, every parent in the room, and I challenge you to take the skills and knowledge that you've gained and apply them when your children reach public school. Continue that kind of commitment to them, because your engagement in their learning will become more and more important through the years. Children need to know that there is nothing more important to, to the people who love them than their health, personal growth, and their education. To me, there is no greater gift you can give than your advocacy and your confidence. Because of everyone here today, and with the support of the president and Secretary Sebelius by your side, we are entering what I believe to be a new era in child development. I urge you to continue fighting for the future of children while they're in Head Start, and long after they graduate. Today there are a lot of pundits and prophets of doom, but you're proving them wrong. They say our best days are behind us. We need not accept that view, because the strength of this nation really is in the people of this nation, and you're stepping up to the plate every day. I remember as a little boy one Sunday morning, walking to church with my family, and, and seeing three blind men asking for alms. But, I noticed at a distance that only one of those three blind men was receiving any contributions, and I didn't understand why until I got a little closer. You see, two of the blind men had signs on their hats that read, "Help the blind." The third blind man had a sign on his hat that said, "It is spring, and I cannot see it." Well I believe, quite frankly, in all the depths of our times today, this really is spring for America. And I hope that generations from now people don't look back and say it was spring and they couldn't see it, but rather they took advantage of that opportunity, they stepped up to the plate, and they made the lives of children better. As President Obama said just a few days ago, "Here's what I understand. that as long of -- as all of us are together, as long as we are all committed, then there truly is nothing we can't do."

Thank you, and keep up the good work.

[Applause]