

**2011 Leadership Institute:
Jerlean Daniel**

Jerlean Daniel: Well, one thing you should never do is let somebody who's a friend introduce you.

[Audience laughs]

Because by the time they get through, the pressure is on. And so, I certainly hope I'm not going to deflate your enthusiasm of these last several days. Thank you so much for inviting me here. It was a pleasure to hear the secretary and to meet a representative from Red Gold, Inc. I am really impressed. You know, we talk about businesses getting involved in early care and education, and, you know, that's - you've put quite a challenge down, and I want other people to know about you, because that's really exciting.

[Applause]

Well, I hope you folks have had a wonderful couple of days. I hope at this point you're feeling rejuvenated and inspired, that you've gained some skills, and most of all, I hope you've collected the cards, and names, and numbers of your colleagues from around the country. Because one of the things that Head Start and Early Head Start is known for is collaboration. And, you are the community that reaches out and helps each other at every step of the way. Nobody in Head Start should ever run into a brick wall, and if you do, you know it's your own fault.

[Audience laughs]

Because you got colleagues who will prop you up and insist that you keep on keeping on. I absolutely love Head Start.

[Applause]

I love Head Start and Early Head Start for a number of reasons. One of them is that it's a multi-generational program. It's a program that recognizes the whole child as nested in a family and a community, and it all starts there. I love Head Start and Early Head Start a strength-based approach. It believes in every person and every child. It believes across cultural boundaries that we all can do and can achieve. I absolutely love what you stand for.

[Applause]

It is you, the leaders of Head Start, who strive for authentic partnerships among families and professional staff. It is you who are on the ground, trying to take this thing to scale, and you've been doing it year, after year, after year. And, it doesn't matter the potshots folks take at you, you know that it can be done. Lots of times people say, "Well, you can't take something wonderful and take it to scale, it just doesn't work." I beg to differ. I beg to differ. I'm proud of the resources that our government has put into Head Start and Early Head Start, and of course, it's never enough, you know.

[Laughter]

We got to get that plug in, Mr. Secretary. It's never enough. But -- But, what you have been able to do, out in the communities, to grow Head Start and Early Head Start, is absolutely phenomenal. Oh, a funny paradox about Head Start is that the expectation is that you will be highly responsive to your communities, there's enough room for you to customize what you do, to make it work for the families and children in your communities. But then the other piece of that is you're given a framework, you're given the, the performance standard, if you will, that point the way to tell you how to do it right. And, I really appreciate both the flexibility and the framework that allows you to move ahead in a high-quality way. Head Start and Early Head Start has been at the forefront of really, intentionally, trying to work in ways that, that build the knowledge base for early care and education. You're, you're our, our, our laboratory, you know. You're the ones who first step out there to try to figure out, for example, "What's a curriculum? How does assessment match it?"

All those years ago when NAEYC came up with the idea of an accreditation system, and one of the criteria was that a program ought to have a curriculum, and, and people looked at each other and said, "What are they talking about?" But in Head Start -- and, and Early Head Start wasn't around then -- but in Head Start, you're the ones who rolled up your sleeves and figured it out and, and showed the rest of us how to do it, and for that, I thank you. You're also at the forefront when assessment and accountability is, is running through the country. You're the programs who are collecting data from, from your programs, trying to figure out, "What's the best curriculum? What's the best tools of assessment for screening and for improving classroom instruction?"

You're the ones at the forefront trying to figure all of this out, and we're all learning from you, and we appreciate that. But let me tell you what I love absolutely most about Head Start. I love Head Start and Early Head Start because they represent the diversity of this country. Look at this room. Here we are, America, you know. Many people, many languages, here we all are together, working on behalf of children and families. You represent our opportunity to finally get it right, to finally get that cross-cultural communication right, to finally meet the needs of diverse people in ways that are strength-building and, and support what they bring to the table.

It's, it's no accident that Head Start as part, and Early Head Start as part of their work, having the Parent Advisory Councils. That's a place where parents can find their voices and use their voices on behalf of their children and their communities, when they go to -- when their children go to school and beyond. This Head Start, Early Head Start experience is a fabulous, multi-generation, family place. It pulsates with energy, and I'm so envious of you, that you get to work, every day, in that kind of community. And, I want to thank you for what you've done to move the whole field of early care and education forward. Now of course, all those things that you and I love about Head Start are the things that make your work really hard. Really hard, you know. People often talk about what is and is not rack -- rocket science. Let me tell you something. That putting of rockets up in the air, what's so hard about that?

[Audience laughs]

I mean, they've got mathematical formulas, they can measure the trajectory, they know the density of the air, and they know how much fuel, and how much heat to put under the fuel. I mean, how on earth do you get that wrong?

[Audience laughs]

Try working with people.

[Audience laughs]

Real people.

[Applause]

Now that's rocket science.

[Audience laughs]

Don't you let anybody tell you the work you do isn't critically important. It is, and it's teaching us lessons throughout our whole society if we just pay attention and listen. Head Start has weathered many a storm, and right now let's just look at our current storm, if you will. This economy has everybody by the throat, it just does. And, it's exposing some bad behavior on the part of some banks, some politicians, some neighbors. You know, people just don't behave very well when money is tight. But you know what? In the Head Start community, working with low-income families, you know that people find a way out of no way, and this is yet an opp -- another opportunity that you can lead us into the light. Another part of our current climate is a really strident, ugly intolerance for differences. It's just abominable the way people treat each other, talk about each other, and make a point of not getting along. You know, it's a badge of honor if you've cussed somebody out, or blocked them at every turn, all in ways that keep the greater good from moving forward. What on earth is wrong with that picture? It's just not right.

[Applause]

I certainly hope that all those folks were raised better than that, but I'm not sure. I'm just not sure. At NAEYC, in this current climate, particularly the economic climate, we've been doing a lot of talking about our double bottom line. And I know in Head Start and Early Head Start you value a well-run program. If you don't have a well-managed program, a program that manage -- manages the, the fiscal and human capital resources, then you can't get to the mission, or the mandate. You can't get there, you can't get children ready for school, you can't help parents find their voices, unless you keep the double bottom line in mind and in balance. And neither one of those lines -- those bottom lines can outweigh the other, and so it's a real challenge to keep the double bottom line in place. The balance that we seek can't happen without highly intentional leaders, focused on the issues of the day, focused on how young children learn and focused on the needs of parents, and helping them build on their strengths and find their voices.

You have an advantage in all of this. You are part of a team of people who doesn't know what "no" means. It's not even in your vocabularies. It's just not there. I have never met a Head Start leader, and by leader -- let me tell you what I mean by leader in Head Start. I'm talking about program directors, I'm talking about the folks who work in the health component, I'm talking about the family engagement folks, the teachers, the aides, the, the Office of Head Start. I'm talking about all up and down and through the system, across services. You are a people who doesn't know what "no" means, and I, I revel in that, I love it.

Let me give you an example of a parent -- a Head Start parent -- that I met many, many years ago. And if you can, you can tell that in a, in a Head Start community, there always stories to tell, there always people that make it real. Well, I'm going to call this young African-American mother Janine. I met her many, many years ago. There was no Early Head Start when I met her, that's how long ago it was. And, Janine had two or three children, and her youngest child was currently enrolled in her community's Head Start program. She was a person who was an active classroom volunteer, and she was engaged in all of the activities of her Head Start program. She knew firsthand what that vibrant program could do to help her realize the dream she had for her children. She had seen each of her older children soar in school because they had a high-quality Early Head Start, I'm sorry, Head Start program. And so, she believed in Head Start.

Well, her neighborhood had begun to change, and the program itself hadn't quite gotten into gear with the change. Increasingly, large numbers of Hispanic families were moving into the community, and so who this Head Start program was serving had begun to change. Among the leaders in Head Start programs are parents, and there's a reason for that, because they live right there in the community and they see the changes before anybody else does. Janine was such a person. And Janine noticed, in her volunteer hours, that she wasn't seeing the new parents in the neighborhood volunteering in the classroom, and she realized that these were people who had come to a strange country, didn't speak the language that the folks at the programs spoke, and didn't really know yet how to get the services they needed. They had found their way to the Head Start program, but they weren't really fully entrenched in it yet. And, she worried about that because she knew for Head Start to really, really work, parents had to be involved. And so, she decided that she ought to do something about this. And so, she took it upon herself to learn some Spanish. She didn't know a thing about Spanish when she started, but as the old folks say, she had an "unction."

[Audience laughs]

And, she knew she needed to get that together so that these new neighbors could feel the full power of the Head Start program she knew and loved. All right. So, she began to learn a little Spanish. And, can you imagine that in the learning of it, I'm sure some of her new neighbors said, "Mm, mm, mm. Is this child ever going to be able to trill her R's?"

{Audience laughs}

And, they chuckled at her mispronunciations, but they valued her eagerness to learn and her wanting to know. She went out door-to-door with her broken Spanish, trying to bring people in and let them know

that this was a safe place, that they too could grow and learn and find their sea-legs in this strange country. Well, she learned enough Spanish, with the generosity of her new neighbors, to conduct parent meetings in Spanish. That's going a ways, isn't it? She learned enough to do that. And, she learned enough, in her eagerness to learn and her, her open generosity, that the families grew to trust her. And so, they took her at her word when she said it was an okay place to come to, and they came, and they participated, and they grew. Once she had learned enough Spanish and was conducting these things, and things were going along, she was, she was pleased, but she wasn't quite through. But, what I want to do is I want to go backwards a minute and I want to look behind this story, because this is an example of leadership in Head Start. She did what leaders do: she gathered first-hand data. She lived in that community.

She saw the statistics. She didn't have to know there were 3,000 more people had moved in. She saw them. They were in her grocery store, they were -- she saw them, she gathered data. She gathered data inside the Head Start program when she looked around and saw that the parents weren't there. She was concerned about the use of resources, because those parents weren't getting the full advantage of the Head Start resource, and so she cared about a well-run program. And you and I know, particularly if you're a program administrator, if you get a parent who's got something in his or her craw, you are going to fix it. You are going to fix it. And so, I imagine that Janine made a real pest of herself, and she got results. She was also open to learning. She was flexible, she wanted to know and was curious, and she was generous. She wanted to share what she had learned and come to, to believe in terms of her new neighbors. She valued the double bottom line and, most importantly, she understood what makes for excellent parent engagement. She knew it had to be strength-based, and she, so she stepped out and met parents where they were, learned from them, and gained their trust. She knew that if this program was going to work for her new neighbors, they had to be part of the critical decision-making, they had to be part of the important stuff.

And so, she brought them to the Parent Council Meeting so they could be part of the important decisions. She also knew that a strong family engagement program has open, two-way communication. It has a learning community where not just one people or one voice had all the right answers, and that's what she offered her new neighbors. She rose to the challenge, and she stepped outside of herself to make this work. How do I know that she rose to the challenge and stepped outside of herself? At the occasion that I met her, it was -- I think it was a leadership conference. It was here in D.C., and it was, it was an NAEYC conference, and somebody said, "How can you have a panel about parents if you don't have a parent there?" And so, a Head Start program had brought a parent to this, to this, this panel. And I was talking with Janine prior to the session, because I was part of the panel, as well.

And so, we're talking, and she indicated that, you know, she was a little nervous, and I said, "I get nervous, too. And mostly, I actually dread all the lead-up "to any speech I'm about to give because you can make yourself into a nervous snit waiting." And she said to me, "Oh, I have a cure for that." I said, "Well, tell me what it is, please." And she said, "Well -- " An we were standing in about the middle of the room, an aisle in the middle of the room because the session hadn't started, and she pointed to the door where people were entering, and she said, "Well, you see that chair on the end?" I said, "Yup." She said, "When I come indoors like this, I leave my shy, scared self in that chair."

[Audience laughs]

And I say, "Self, I'll be back for you. I've got something to do."

[Audience laughs]

[Applause]

Janine didn't see herself as a leader when she started all that. She was accepting a challenge, and she knew she had -- she knew it wasn't about her. And so, she had to find a place for that self that couldn't step up to the plate. I just, every time I think of her, and the, the notion of being able to, to, to move away from that scared piece of you and take on the challenge to speak truth to power, that's a fabulous notion, and, and a Head Start program gave her that wherewithal, gave her that wherewithal. Well, now what I'd like you to do is look around you. Look at your neighbors, look behind you.

[Audience murmuring]

Many of you -- many of you are of the same age cohort.

[Audience laughs]

What's funny about that? Okay.

[Audience laughs]

But many of you have been at this a long, long time. All right? And I don't absolve myself. I'm of a certain age, as well. One of the things in early childhood we have not quite nailed down yet is how to pass the torch. We haven't figured that out.

[Applause]

Think about the people who were honored yesterday morning. Was it morning? Yesterday. Think how many people T. Berry Brazelton has touched. Okay. Before I ever said hello to the man in person, I'd been touched. Hadn't you? Because we've seen his work in action. Do you remember those television programs? They were, you know, where, where the pace was calm and slow. It was a child and parent's learning space, and in his gentle way, he nurtured folks. Both generations he nurtured. I'm reminded of Fred Rogers, who also a gentle person who nurtured, gave children time and space to grow and learn, accepted them for who they were. Those early childhood ancestors who've touched all of our lives, some of us don't even know we've been touched, you know, but there are certain ways of thinking about early childhood education, that we wouldn't be in that place if we hadn't had those early childhood legacy folks. Well, now, just like Janine, maybe you're sitting here thinking, "Well, I can accept that I'm a leader. "I've been out here for 20, 30 years, you know, "try, trying to beat this horse and make it go."

[Audience laughs]

"So maybe, okay, I'm a leader. But a legacy?" Maybe you don't think that about yourself. But let me tell you something. Legacies are built one person at a time. Legacies are built touching one child, one family, one community at a time. All of us are in that groundswell legacy. But, you know, we won't have completed the circle unless we come more intentional about that legacy, more intentional about passing on the torch. I have, I have two grown children now in their forties, but when my son was about 17, 18 years old, he taught me an important lesson. I had just left a program that I was -- a child care center that I was the director of, and in a mere two years, they had had three brand new directors. And so, I was bemoaning this, and Omare said to me, as only a 17-year-old could, he said to me, "Momma, that's your fault." And I did a classic thing. I said, "I beg your pardon?"

[Audience laughs]

Okay. How did -- what was he talking about? What did he even know? Well, what he knew was that he'd been gathering data, and he had been watching me -- with all my gusto and love of my work, he'd been watching me. And he said to me, "It's your fault, Ma, because first of all, you love your work so much that you probably needed two or three people to do what you're doing, but you did it yourself anyway." Does this sound at all familiar?

[Audience laughs]

But you did it anyway. He said, "How is that board of directors to have any idea to know that they needed more resources? You're out there doing it." I said, "Oh, my goodness." He had a point. I was guilty as charged. Guilty as charged. And so, I don't want that to happen to, to the rest -- to us. I don't -- I want us, as early childhood leaders, to pay attention to passing that torch. How many meetings you go to in a year? A dozen? That's probably too few. But let's say it's a dozen. How many times do you take somebody to that meeting with you? And they can sit on the sidelines, perhaps. But you take them with you, you tell them what's the meeting's about, they sit through the meeting, and you talk about it afterwards. That's passing the torch. I don't care if that's a high school student, a college student --

[Applause]

Or a member of your staff, or a parent. You give them a context, you take them to the meeting, and you talk about it afterwards. And you know what? The insights they can give you, because they're watching everybody, the insights they can give you are really important. What is it you say when you see a bright, analytic mind? You know, one of those really perky, chipper young folks who has the audacity to think that, with their brand new degree, perhaps.

[Audience laughs]

That they can cure that problem tomorrow if you just get out of their way.

[Audience laughs]

And they mouth off a lot, you know. And you're thinking, "Oh, man, I see the potential, but they're just not ready." Well, that's unacceptable. That's unacceptable. We've got a legacy here from fine individuals

like T. Berry Brazelton and others that we've got to pass on. We've got to hand folks the torch so they can continue this struggle, to make the world what it ought to be. And so, when you see that mouthy, bright, analytic mind, don't go, "Oh, man, here we go," but to say instead, "Well, what can I do to mature that person? What kind of experiences can I offer? What kind of situations can I put them in so that they can grow, and learn, and lead?" That's our responsibility. We have got to do that. We've got to do it systematically. And, you know, they talk about, you know -- a pearl, you know, it's made because the sand irritates it, and the next thing you know, over time, you've got something highly valued. What pearls are you growing, or nurturing, or cultivating, I guess is the right word. What pearls are you cultivating where you stand or sit in this work? It's a task that we all must take on, and the reason it's ours to do is, for those of us who value, and respect, and thrive on diversity, we're the ones who have to push this forward. We're not going to get it right until we're all connected. You have insights, you have knowledge. You've got to pass it on, and you've got to lead folks forward. Let me give you just one example of a, of an early childhood leader who, who sparked me, and she didn't even know she was doing it at the time. There are many I could name who sparked me, but this one was quite accidental. When, when I was first elected to the NAEYC governing board, they were meeting, you know, they, they would meet in these places that no one would go in July, you know, because it was either too hot or, you know. And, we'd go to these places and meet.

And, and so, the van at the airport picked up everybody who arrived at a certain time, and I find myself, a child care center director who had no notion of being a leader, I only ran because I was tired of being part of the problem. I wanted to figure out, kind of hang out with some folks who got some solutions, I thought. And, I found myself in a van with Bernice Weissbourd, who is from Chicago, a really important figure in the whole strength-based, family engagement, self-empowerment movement. Bernice Weissbourd, Betsy Haichu, a public-policy wonk from California, who by sheer force of will made NAEYC pay attention to public policy, and being advocates in that way for children and families. And the third person was Gwen Morgan. You know Gwen Morgan of the three-legged stool? If you're going to have high-quality programs you have to pay attention to access and affordability, and then the, the, the professional development of, of the folks who are doing the work. What you call the three legs changes sometimes, but basically it was three legs that needed to support early care and education work. And so, we're in this van and I am in awe.

And, the three of them are having this conversation, but they're engaging me a bit, and Gwen Morgan said out loud, almost as though she was talking to herself, "You know, it's going to be real interesting what this new class of freshman board members bring to the board."

[Audience laughs]

I thought, "She's talking about me and those other guys who are part of this, you know. She thinks I've got something to say!" She set me free. What she said was, "Don't be afraid. Be yourself. We're waiting on you." In that van, she passed me a torch, okay. And in the passing of that torch, when I got to my very first board meeting, I didn't know how to be quiet.

[Audience laughs]

I just talked, and talked, and talked. And, threw my papers on the floor. Just talked, and talked, and talked. Well, thereafter, freshman board members were not allowed to talk in their first meeting.

[Audience laughs]

But it was fun. It was fun. But she turned me loose and passed the torch. Let me tell you about another board member, a brand new board member for us this year. Her name is Amy O'Leary, she is from Massachusetts. Amy O'Leary is, is a public policy wonk and a real staunch advocate for children. She started, as many of us did, as a classroom teacher. Her very first professional conference that the director of her program sent her to, the director called her into her office just before she left, and she handed Amy preschool teacher business cards. She said to her, "Don't come back here with any of those. I expect you to network, get out among your colleagues. Learn something, share something, and bring back a few cards." What Amy says about that is she said -- just the whole notion of a business card, it blew her mind. But, she was set free because her director said, "You're somebody. "You're a leader. Go for it." So I would challenge you, on this high that you have, for these days you spent together, that you will reach out, that you will see yourself as an important, critical part of the Head Start, Early Head Start legacy, of the whole early care and education legacy, that you will reach out and bring one, two, three, ten people forward. Bring them into the leadership circle, so that they can carry on. We've got a lot of work to do, folks, and you're in a wonderful spot to get that work done. I thank you for what you've done, and what I know you'll keep doing, as you tackle the real rocket science.

Thank you.

[Applause]