The Heart of My Head Start Experience  
Sherial Nance

I don’t remember much of my time in Head Start in the 1973 and 1974 Ozark/Sparta Missouri area, but the things I do remember have been the leading forces in my life since that time. I remember that I was safe and loved. I could go there every day and they would take care of me. There were hugs and smiles and kind words that changed the way I had learned to treat people before that time. I could go there and not hear my parents fighting. I remember that I wasn’t hungry. I could go to Head Start and eat good food and my belly would be full all day and there was always “enough” for everyone, because it wasn’t always that way at home.

Fast forward to many years later. I had been in college in Georgia seeking a degree in secondary education to be an English teacher. I postponed finishing to care for my son who was, at that time, just diagnosed with Autism and Cerebral Palsy. We moved to Missouri in 1996 to be closer to family and the support system that was here. My son started school and because I wasn’t caring for him full time, in order to keep my services with the state that I had in place, I had to join the “welfare to work” program and find a place to volunteer part time. The closest place to my house was the local Head Start. I thought “Well that would be easy enough. I can just go play for a while and then go home.” They welcomed me with open arms and I quickly realized this was a place I wanted to stay. I felt like I was home. I got the same feelings, as an adult, as I did as a child. I felt safe and loved and fed both body and soul. I saw a need in these children that felt familiar and I remembered how the teachers all those years ago filled that need in me and I wanted to do the same.

I changed the course of my life at that point. I volunteered until the center needed a sub and then I applied and moved up to that position. Within 2 years I moved up to Teacher Aide and then Teacher. I changed my major and with a combination of online and night courses finished my Associate’s and Bachelor’s degrees in Child Development in 2005. All of the education I received just reinforced in me what Head Start instilled in me early. Real learning could not take place without basic needs being met.
I decided, at that point, that if I did nothing else in my Head Start career I would make sure that children were safe while they were with me. I would love them with all my heart and make sure they knew it and make sure no child goes hungry if there was any way I could prevent it. I taught in the same Head Start center from 2000-2014 and my heart was touched by more children that I can count!

In January of 2014, I moved to the Head Start Education Manager position so that I could share my love and knowledge of children and how they learn with our staff and community. Not very long after I moved to this new position, I went back to the center where I had taught to meet and train new staff that had recently been hired. One of the new staff that I met stopped me after the training and asked me if I was ever a teacher at that center. I told her yes and we talked about her grandchildren that had been in Head Start. I told her that I remembered them well and asked how they were doing. She smiled and said “My grandson told me to ask if there was a teacher named Ms. Sherial there. I told him my boss has that name. He said you ask her if she was my teacher. If she was she will remember me. I told him that it’s been so long she can’t remember every kid. He said ‘You ask her, if she was my teacher she will remember me because she loved me.’

With that my circle was complete. All I’ve ever wanted was to make sure children had that same feeling that I had all those years ago. To know that even one child 16 years later was so certain of that knowledge makes it all worth it for me. Now I want to share the importance of making that connection, with each and every child that comes through our doors, with everyone who is willing to listen.