

Neon Days/Head Start

Nell Fields, Aleece Jones (Dir. LKLP Head Start), Lois Hill (Head Start teacher),
Steve Brewer (former student and community activist), etc.

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Nell Fields: ...RFK in EKY, which was a project that we designed around providing a platform for the issues of 1968 and 2004 to be discussed again and put on the table and talked about and reflected upon and visualized, hopefully, by all of us – solutions to the problems of today. One of the War on Poverty programs, one of the most successful parts of the War on Poverty programs, was the Head Start program. So that's why we decided to focus this forum around the Head Start program and, in particular, because it's had such a positive impact on things in eastern Kentucky and Appalachia where – which was what Kennedy's visit was about was visiting here in Appalachia and looking at the circumstances of children living in poverty at the time. So, I think this is a very appropriate way for us to end it. I hope that I can gather my thoughts again here a little bit... But, we have with us Elise Jones. Elise is the director of the LKLP Head Start program which is the Head Start program in this region. And Lois Hill who is, who has been a Head Start teacher all these many years. She was the Head Start teacher in 1968 when Kennedy came to Fleming-Neon and stopped in her center and read a storybook to the children there. So, maybe we can just let them tell a little bit about their reflections on Robert Kennedy and their memories of his legacy, his work then, and we can carry on from there.

Aleece Jones: I just want to say that as far as Head Start is concerned and the impact that I feel that Robert Kennedy's visit and the War on Poverty that it has changed many, many lives. And we have some parents and teachers that are here today and they will share their story. One of the things that since I've been Head Start Director one of the things that I feel that I want to see happen is that all of our children and all of our people feel very good about this place and where they live and appreciate the beauty and appreciate the strengths that we have and build upon those strengths. And that is something that we have worked on doing in Head Start and there's been untold children that have benefited from it. But Head Start really benefits the parents too because it involves the parents in a meaningful way. Head Start is the only program that is still directly funded – from the War on Poverty – it's the only one that the funds still come down to local communities. And we make the decisions about – under certain guidelines – we make those decisions about how our Head Start will be. And we try to work to meet the needs of the community. And it has been a blessing in my life personally, which I will talk about later if we have some time. But I would like Lois to tell us a little bit about when the visit came and what your feelings were as far as Robert Kennedy...

Lois Hill: Good afternoon to everybody. Good afternoon to my staff. I'm so proud. As I look over the crowd I don't recognize any of my parents here, but I

do recognize Steve Brewer. He worked with me years and years ago and I had his daughter. And I appreciate you, Steve. You did a lot for me. And, but, I have been working with young children for thirty-eight years and I have enjoyed every day of it. And I feel honored today to be able to talk about Robert Kennedy. He was one fine gentleman. When he came, I wasn't expecting him to come to my school. And I remember so well that he came up and he parked down by the church. And he walked up through the playground and came in – we didn't have the porch then – we had steps. He came in and I looked at him and he walked over. I said, "Hi." And he walked over and he hugged me and he kissed me. And he was just one of us. He wasn't – I know he was a celebrity, he was a Kennedy – but it didn't show. He was just like me, or Steve, or anyone else in here. And he came in and showed him the center and he couldn't get over the things that we were doing with young children and where, you know, they had come from. In the rural areas of Fleming-Neon, Hindman, Roberts, and Dean – we went over to Dean and got children. But I think of him and I can picture him of going through. But he was very careful. He had his water. He carried his water with him. And I didn't ask him why. I thought, "What you doin' bringin' that water in my house? You think I'm nasty?" I thought to myself. But I didn't say it. But he really enjoyed the children. And I have a lot of memories of children and parents over the years. And I feel like, in my heart, that I've made a difference in a lot of children and a lot of families. And I hope to continue for a while.

Aleece: I think I would like Steve to come up and talk a little bit about his Head Start experience and to tell you that before Head Start he was very shy and retired.

Steve: ...if they can have something like that, we can have some. Well, so we took and got Marlow Tackett in over here to have a big dance up here at the BMW Club. So he came over and played music for us and we renovated that whole building up there. We couldn't get it done. Elise, she was in the background, giving us that oooh, oooh, oooh, and helping us along with everything. And she done a lot of good for us, Mamaw done a lot of good for us. But my favorite story is this: I was their chairperson and couldn't get 'em a raise. I mean, they just didn't want to give these ladies a raise. They wanted to make all the money and these people not make nothing. So we went to Frankfort. That was a real catastrophe. I almost got put in jail getting' everybody a raise! But they got a raise – didn't you? – everybody got a raise and they come back and they didn't want to deal with me no more. But anyway, so, my term as up, and the main people was saying, Elise and Mamaw and them was saying, "Oh man, his term's up. What are we gonna do?" And so they come up and devise this plan. They said, "We'll get this other person to run for the Chairperson's job. Then we'll get them to resign. You'll be the vice-chair, so I would run for vice-chair, and you'll be back as a Chairperson. So we done that. We campaigned, got this guy to run for the Chair. He won, so after he won, he served two of three days, whatever it was, he resigned, I was back in the Chair and these three was right back in the seat. Thank you very much.

Elise: One of the things that I thought – and I really don't, I don't know what has meant the most to me – but I really believe that it has been the growth that I see in children and in staff and the things that we will have and the things that we will do. Three years ago our program was reviewed by, well, we call it the SWAT team, but they had come in. And there's usually six or seven, and they stay for a week and they review our team. They review our Head Start program and what it is doing. And in, on this particular one, they had sent someone from Washington to join the Atlanta crew to see that, to make sure that they were doing the things that they should be doing as far as monitoring. And when they came and they met with our parents, they visited our classrooms...

Elise: We did was what it was meant for and we had an excellent program. And like Lois was saying, age got the seeds here. I should have retired cause we're due for another review and I don't think it would even be possible to even come up with something like that again. But part of the reason that Head Start has been a success has been that it is really run by the parents. The parents are the decision making group of Head Start. And we have a brand new staff member and I'm going to put her on the spot... would you come up Eleanor? Because she was a Head Start parent.

(Lois?) And you know, she's one of my parents - I had her two children.

(Debbie): You had me up there too.

(Lois?) And she was a jewel in our center. That is why... because of parents like this.

Eleanor: My name is Eleanor Hall. I think I've had every sibling to end up going to this Head Start program... and I went the whole time I was young until it was time for me to go to the first grade. And I loved it. I can remember Miss Debbie, she was always there, and Miss Fay – she was the very one, the very first day I went, that looked at me and said, nobody bother Eleanor over there, she's typing me a letter. We had an old typewriter that we just set and played on. The memories were, one child after the other to play with. Even though I had you know twelve other siblings you know it was different to me with new kids, you learn to play with other kids, besides the ones you got at home.

Well then I ended up with both my children going, back in, well, one of them's fifteen now, and the other one's eleven. And they both went, and I couldn't volunteer with my oldest child, cause I had the younger one at home. But I did get to volunteer at Fleming with my youngest daughter we did quite a bit up there with them. I loved it, and I ended up at Central Office this year.

Also before I got my job I went back to college and I got these two kids and I was carrying 18 credit hours just about every semester. Working a job, working on

work study at college in order to get this degree I wanted and I ended up with two degrees in three years.

Aleece: Our program also recognized... Hilton has a program, its called Special Quest and its for they, we, I don't know, we're one of I don't know, in our region, we're one of eight I think in our region that was selected to participate in a special program working that really addressed children and working with families as far as handicap... we got a team together and one of our parents agreed to go with us, received the training, and she's leading... for years we tried to get together a support group for parents that had children with some special needs, well we never could go, get it going, but we got a parent that's going to get it going, Michelle Wynn, you wanna come say a few words?

Michelle: Hi, I'm Michelle Wynn. I have to admit that I didn't really know a whole lot about Head Start. My oldest daughter didn't go to Head Start, but then we got two toddlers, and they were in a daycare in Whitesburg, and strangely enough were expelled. The youngest one had some problems we didn't recognize. We didn't know what to look for. So the Jenkins Head Start accepted them. The little girl went in like she owned the place, just took over, but the little boy had some problems. He couldn't communicate, he's developmentally delayed and he couldn't tell us what was wrong, what he wanted and the instructors, the caregivers at the Head Start recognized that and got him the help that he needed. And today, he can not only tell us what is wrong, what he needs or wants, but he is just highly intelligent. He can spell words like Atlanta and George and words that kids don't know until like third grade. So to me, they've just done an immense job with my child, well with both of them, but especially with Logan cause he needed help that his parents, we, didn't recognize, but they did. So, Head Start to me, you just can't beat it. I mean they really stepped in there...

Aleece: I would like the lead teacher at Jenkins, Miss Debbie to come. She was part of the team that recognized and got some help for Michelle's young'un.

Debbie: I'm Debbie Jarrett, I'm the lead teacher at the Jenkins Head Start. I was the teacher when Eleanor went... to Head Start and I'm the teacher when Logan goes to Head Start. And Logan is amazing. He's truly amazing. And uh every child is special, and every family's special. And that's what we want to do at Head Start, is make sure everybody recognizes that in themselves. And in their children, and in their families.

Aleece: He just asked me if I was gonna sit back down and I said probably not, you can get the chair out of the way. I would like to ask Dorothy Miles to come up, she has been with Head Start since it became full year. And she's been the Parenting Models Specialist.

Dorothy: I've been with Head Start since it started, and I'm also a person that lives at the Cowan Community Center... I helped get the Cowan Community Center started... I think it's a beautiful place too. And I've been with Head Start ever since it started as I said in 1968 and I had a son that went to summer Head Start so I think it's just the greatest program there is and that's the reason I've been with it so long that I just love to watch the children and the families grow.

Aleece: One of the things that Head Start does is make sure that children get from well, we make sure that they get 2/3rds of their daily food requirements and I'm going to ask Miss Fay to come up and just say a word about that...

Miss Fay: My name is Fay Miller, and I've been with Head Start since 1976. I've been cooking for em that long. I was at Millstone for twenty some years and I've been at Fleming with Lois for eight. My heart goes out to the kids, because I will feed the kids, they love the cookin' ... and I will feed em. When I go in they're draggin on my legs and they said, we smell the food. We want to eat. And I said give me time to set the table and we're going to eat. And they all sit in my lap and love me and say they love this. One little girl this year calls me the treat lady and her mommy asked her well why do you call her the treat lady and she says because she brings me corn. I love the treat lady. And so they'll say her name is Fay and she'll say un-uh, her name's treat lady and her mommy told her the other night she said that's my treat lady and she draws her fist up and says un-uh, she is my treat lady. And I love working with the kids, I don't have that much time to spend with them in the classroom and what time I do they're all during the day I love it. I worry a lot over children and um I don't know, I've raised three of my own, four grandchildren, and one thing about it, I've had the finest boss in Head Start anyone could ever have. ...you have took me through the toughest times of my life and I've had some tough ones what she's always been there for me, for the best friends and the best boss that I could ever have.

Aleece: That is the thing about Head Start, it's a family. It really is, it's not just... it's a family among staff... a family, we don't just do, we don't just work with the children, we become very concerned with the family and do our best to make sure that things move forward for them. I'm going to ask... I don't know, Barbara can you be put on the spot? Do you have a child in Head Start?

Barbara: I don't have one, but I've had three in Head Start... I suppose I could be put on the spot... Hi, my name's Barbara Hatch. I've got three daughters and the first one was in Head Start in Pike County and then, actually both of my first one's were in Pike County and my middle one was three when she went to Head Start, actually she went to Head Start twice cause she was three years old and she went to four year old also. Vanna went to Head Start here in Mountain Heritage, and I think it was a great experience for her cause it gave her socialization, it gave her, you know, a way to get along with the other kids, and it done real good for us cause we had a way of communicating with her and being able to find out what she needed and it was a great program.

Aleece: Vanna, would you like to say something about Head Start?

Vanna: Head Start, get along with people that are in, I got to play things with people, and uh lots of other things.

Nell: What was your favorite fancy?

Vanna: My favorite thing to do was play in the sandbox.

Steve: And nap time...

Henriette: And how many children are there in your group?

Vanna: There's like twenty-two... maybe less.

John: And what grade are you in now?

Vanna: Now I'm in third grade.

Aleece: And we had a teacher that went with her and moved on and Vanna was sure that the teacher was going with her everywhere, right? But she's back here with us, you know? Thank you Vanna. Jill, would you like to share some of your experiences with Head Start, about Head Start? I was gonna get Heather, but all she was dyin...

Jill: I'm Jill Hatch and I talk more like Robert Kennedy than most people in the area, and one of the things is that that from the very beginning had meaning for me, for Head Start, I was here, I had a three year old son, well he was a baby when we came but he was three at the time and I was looking for a job, wanted to go back to work and I went for all these interviews... I'm gonna tell you, no offense to our public library system... I interviewed for the bookmobile driver and they didn't hire me because they didn't think people could understand what I was saying, and that was, that was OK... I was trying with our public schools to get a position etc, and when I was interviewed for my Head Start job there was a teacher and there was a parent as part of the interview. I have to say, and again, not to cast aspersions on anyone, but I truly felt like I was being given the fairest chance possible to present myself as a potential person who could do good work, and I think that's a hallmark of the Head Start program. Number one, it thinks all children deserve the best, and, thanks to our leadership here, we certainly have been able to deliver that in a four county area for our kids. It also accepts all of us right where we are: you don't have to be a certain way to be part of Head Start.

And when I taught up the road in Hemphill, we had children in that class, at one time Head Start ran services for the school's kindergarten, cause we didn't have

kindergartens in the state of Kentucky... this was back at that time, we had a girl in the class who could read, she could read everything, she could read my teacher's manual, she read everything, OK? And then we had children who needed our assistance in conversing in carrying on conversations, in vocabulary building, but all of those children's needs were met right where they were. Nobody had to fit a certain mold and years ago in the late nineties, Head Start went through some reauthorization in congress and as part of that reauthorization Head Start did a lot of looking at itself and came up with a list of what its core values were and top among the core values was that we would always individualize for our families and our children, that everyone would have their needs met as individuals and we would meet children where they are and families where they are.

So let me tell you some of the wonderful things that our Head Start has been able to accomplish as an example of what Head Start does nationally – the Head Start in our local area, the LKLP Head Start was designated by the Head Start Bureau as the model family literacy site for the state of Kentucky. That meant that when people needed information on how do we help children and their families continue to build literacy it was this Head Start in eastern Kentucky that was the model for the state of Kentucky. And we're really really proud of that, and of our staff who does all that work on the ground. That's hard work folks, real hard work the people do.

We were selected by Robert Wood Johnson to work in a special way to help build a new set of skills for our staff so that we could address the critical problem of preventing substance abuse among our children when they were older. This was a different way to look at it. It wasn't like teach me to wear a red ribbon and I'm gonna say no, it was how can we strengthen families, how can we give children the ability to say no when they're very young. How can we strengthen our communities... what strong communities, strong families, make strong children and we were fortunate enough, long... a couple of years before UNITE, three or four that we began to do this work on the ground with our families in Letcher County. We're hoping to spread that throughout our program.

There's been a lot of issues that's come to this country that they've asked Head Start to deal with, and Head Start has met that challenge every single time. Folks didn't give you the details cause they're too humble to tell you of their work when they went to school, I don't know how to prompt it, Barbara didn't necessarily go into it... but when folks needed to go to work, to work and move into the work force Head Start was there to support parents and the families so that they could get the skills that they needed and that task was given to Head Start... we're all of us a different person because of Head Start, and I have to include myself in that... it's a family it's a mission it's a vision it's a commitment and its not anything I think any of us would lay down lightly, when we do lay it down, and I thinks its like something that's in our pores... we, I am so personally humbled being able to work there...

Aleece: I want my books... if anyone else would like to say anything, I'll, I'll give you the chance before I kind of wrap up... What I hope will come from this is that we all have to be actively involved. This is from Children's Defense Fund and it says when its budget cutting time children can't stand up for themselves, make sure that those who represent you stand up for them. Kentucky, by the Children's Defense Fund, our representatives and senators have, they're in the lower ten percent, the worst ten percent in the nation in voting for children and family issues. And so what I hope will come out of this thing as far as Robert Wood Johnson is we, as a community, Robert Wood Johnson, ROBERT KENNEDY, I hope that can come out of this reenactment for us and this community is we as a community and every organization that we belong to every civic group that is in this four county area, that we will join together and our area will have the largest percentage of voters turn out and vote on election day.

And that will take all of us getting out voting, and getting out working, talking to people about getting out the vote. You talk to, if you belong to the Kiwanas Club talk to them, if you belong to the Lion's Club talk to them. The Girl Scouts are already doing a thing as far as asking people to make a promise that they will vote, so if we all come together as a community, we can make it work.

I also want to read two or three things from this book, which is Marian Wright Edelman when they did stand for children: it says no one in America should harm children and that everyone can do more to ensure that you grow up in safe, healthy and educated, and nurturing families and communities. That means we all have a responsibility for the communities that our children grow up in. Another thing, there's two or three things, in here, I just wanted to read the one because it was about Abraham Lincoln, Trust in God's Love. God lifted up Abraham Lincoln, a poor, rural, Kentucky boy to the presidency of the United States, to save our nation, to save our union from slavery and sectionalism, and this is the last part... she closed with a prayer, and I'm not gonna read all the prayer but...

O God, forgive our rich nation, that thinks security rests in missiles rather than in mothers, and in bombs rather than in babies.

Steve: If y'all will indulge me one second, I'd like to call the people who's really on the front lines of this thing when it first started... Nell Fields, Dorothy come up here a minute, Lois come over here, I want to get the one's that's here and I want you to give this crew, they was on the front firing lines when this thing started years ago. All right, let's give em a great big round of applause...

John: Tell us something about the challenges that Head Start faces along the lines of national policy at this point...

Aleece: for the first time in Head Start's history, they're wanting to change the makeup of how Head Start would work. Head Start is the only program that is left the funding comes direct to the community and it was there was well our people our representatives and things voted that Head Start be, pilot projects be given to the state, and if that occurs, Head Start will change, it will go to block grant and there will be another layer of bureaucracy that that goes through and it will go to the public schools rather than being in the form of a block grant. So it is critical for Head Start that we do get out and vote.

Jill: It's no accident that Head Start is the last existing program from the war on poverty and the reason we're still here has been the voice of Head Start parents both in Head Start and outside Head Start. And the biggest fear that I have, and many of the folks that Steve had come up here went through the Graham Rudmann thing when we got no money for a decade but had to keep serving more kids and went without those raises all those years and went and worked in facilities that weren't adequate for children and we were fortunate enough in the democratic administration of the nineteen nineties to receive quality money that allowed us to raise staff salaries, that allowed us to build new facilities and improve old facilities. Since the year 2000 we have received no quality assistance.

Part of what is happening in public policy with Head Start right now is to not just move where the money goes, but that also takes out the voice of the parents, of the children being served. And so there are real critical public policy issues involved in this whole thing and our president, our current president would be able to say well look what I did, I took six billion dollars and gave it to education and what he won't say is I took six billion dollars from the poorest children in this country and their families and gave it to the state educational systems to do with as they will in serving children of the same age group. And that's a critical difference in our communities where we live, it's critically a piece of what Robert Kennedy was about.

As I heard people yesterday and I have to tell you John, I never knew it was gonna be like that, it was it was it was just such a public participatory theater with such meaning I mean it really grabbed, at many times, I mean if you watched the high school kids when the young man was testifying, there was no way our children, our high school students could have learned more about speaking out than in that moment in time. And what I heard people say over and over and over and over when they met Robert Kennedy was, when he was here, was that he believed the people could solve their own problems, that he believed in listening to people, in taking their advice and using it. That's the piece that Head Start still has, that's the piece that's in jeopardy right now for the Head Start program. So we do want to ask you all to be sure you register, be sure you're registered. If you've moved you may have to re-register, there's a booth across the street, and November 2nd is the day.

Linda Burnham: Other than that, I mean just in terms of, are you talking about voting for president, or is there more that we could do to help Head Start?

Jill: Well, I think that we have state issues too OK, and I think...

Linda: But some of us are from out of state...

Jill: Right, Head Start's a national program, yeah... we starved under Republican administrations and we prospered under Democratic administrations...

Aleece: You can check with Children's Defense Fund, they keep track of how all of the states, how they voted on, so we can look up your state and see how you're doing...

Jill: Thank you all.