

How I Discovered My Life's Purpose: Tanya's Story

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Finding Her Voice: Tanya's Path as a Head Start Parent and Lifelong Disability Advocate

Head Start gave Tanya and her daughter confidence, and also directed Tanya's passion toward advocacy.

As a former Head Start parent who has a child with disabilities, I had always been deeply involved in ensuring that teachers and staff felt confident and supported in meeting my child's needs. My advocacy led me to become the president of our parent policy committee—a group of Head Start parents who lead and make decisions together about our program. This is where I learned about my rights and discovered the power of having a voice.

Encouraged by those around me, I pursued my associate degree in early childhood development and then began working for Easterseals. I started as a classroom teacher and gradually advanced to the role of Disability Assistant, supporting families who were in situations like my own. I helped these families access vital services, including referrals to Chicago Public Schools (CPS). Later, I became a Safe Environment Manager—even though my heart always remained with serving children with disabilities.

Now, I've come full circle and have returned to my passion as a Disability Specialist. I'm also currently pursuing my bachelor's degree in early childhood development so I can strengthen my ability to advocate even further, and support and empower families.

My commitment to Head Start runs deep. I believe in its mission, and I am dedicated to making a lasting impact in the lives of the children and families we serve.

It is because of Head Start that my child was given an invaluable opportunity: to be in an inclusive environment where she was not only supported academically, but also embraced socially. Being surrounded by both typically developing peers and a caring, knowledgeable staff helped her feel accepted and understood. This experience gave her a strong foundation for her personal growth and future education. The inclusive setting nurtured her strengths, encouraged her independence, and helped her build meaningful relationships. As a parent, witnessing this transformation was powerful—it affirmed the importance of inclusive practices and fueled my own passion to advocate for children with disabilities.

Head Start didn't just change my child's life; it inspired the path I'm on today, working to ensure all children and families receive the same opportunities for growth, acceptance, and success.

Tanya Sanchez *Disability Specialist, Early Learning Services, Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford*

Photo: Tanya with her daughter, Briana.