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- MISS REBECCA

Rebecca Michel

Dedicated to PEACE, Inc. for 40 Years



EMPOWERING PEOPLE TO THRIVE | EST. 1968

You've been an employee with PEACE, Inc. for 40 years, why?

MISS BECKY: I became involved with Head Start in 1974. I'm a single mom of three - Charles, Dan, and Tina. We started in a home-based program. That was for about a year. Then, the program became center-based, we moved, and we have been located at Grace Episcopal Church ever since. My last two children were enrolled in Head Start, one for ten months and the other for two years. As a single mom, I knew my children needed some fun in their lives. Head Start not only provided that, but much more. I became very involved in the classroom and subbing in the kitchen. My son's teacher - she wanted me there all the time because, and these are her words about me, I was good with the kids; an extra set of hands; and a good person. There were many days I didn't want to come. Well, she sent the bus driver for me - that became a joke after a while.

In 1978, I was hired as the cook. I remember being driven to New Street - where PEACE, Inc. was located then - and being interviewed. Someone from PEACE, Inc. drove me. By that time, I was already working with PEACE, Inc. because my two children - my middle and youngest - were in Head Start. My youngest child entered in 1976 at age 3. We have eight staff members now. Back then, there were four - a teacher assistant, bus driver, cook, and a teacher - and the teacher was also the nurse, center manager, and the family worker. The cook who was here was sick throughout the year and I was subbing for her a lot. I did a lot of subbing in the classrooms, too. Then, the cook couldn't do the job anymore. They called me. I took the job. Never in my life did I intend to be here this long. My original plan was, when my kids were in school all day, I was going back to be a phone operator. But the company - New York Telephone - moved to Troy. I wasn't going to uproot my family.

I stayed with PEACE, Inc. because I had kids in school and I had time off. I didn't have to worry about childcare. When my kids were off, I was off with them. It's an ideal place to work if you're a single, young mother. The perks are very high here. I have done every job there is here throughout the years. My favorite stuff was putting things together like paperwork - there was no computer back then, the paperwork was much easier. Kim Barone, PEACE, Inc. Head Start/Early Head Start Associate Director, shared "Not only is Becky Michel one of the most kind-hearted women you want to meet, she is a dedicated, responsible employee who takes great pride in her skills. She continuously shows love and compassion for all of the children at the Baldwinsville site. She knows each one by name and has established a rapport with the parents. Due to her many years of service at that site, she assists the staff and site supervisor and remains an integral part of the Baldwinsville team."

I was on policy council, says Miss Becky, and one thing I remember most that made an impact was when we voted on a bus. Before we had a bus, we had a station wagon. My oldest child was already five when I found out about PEACE, Inc. I lived way out in the country. I came home and there was a note on my door saying, "Do you want your child in Head Start?" That's how they did it back then. I called. I was told where to go - the First Baptist Church. We went and saw what it was about. We didn't have transportation. So, we participated in the home-based part of it, and the station wagon - it was *the* station wagon, transported my child once a week for socialization. The station wagon was our transportation for many months. It was a very old station wagon. It had seatbelts, just seatbelts - that's how long ago this was. It only picked up a few kids and my son was one of them. The driver was in a band. He would come to class with his guitar and sing to the kids. His name was Ken Harms. This was way back, back when car seats had a built-in toy steering wheel - can you imagine that now, the safety issues? I mean, I used to climb in the back window of my family's car and go to sleep when I was little. You can't do that stuff now.

In about 1977, our Head Start moved to where we are now at Grace Episcopal Church. By the time we moved we had a bus. Those early days were fun days. We did a lot with the kids. We traveled. Once we got the bus, we'd go on field trips - picnics, a lot of picnics all over the place at different parks. We went on a train one time, to the airport and got on a plane, visits to fire stations. Since I was the cook, I would make bag lunches. I used to buy the groceries at P&C in Baldwinsville and the bus driver would pick me up. Then, we'd come back and put them away - it was like being a mother. I was a mom. I cooked. So, I just did it in here.

The first teacher at PEACE, Inc. in Baldwinsville helped me out a lot. Her name was Suzanne. I came in as a really broken up mother because I was going through a rough divorce. Suzanne guided me along and saw in me stuff I didn't know was in there. We still talk to each other a couple times a year. Support from the teacher was amazing. And, a funny story, my son's teacher discovered he was colorblind. That explained a lot about when he got dressed by himself. His teacher, she picked up on that right away. She put letters on my wall in my living room. My son couldn't pick out the right color. Then, a fun fact, we found out that color blindness is inherited - in this case, from my father.

That support has always been here - even with where we are located. Head Start has been supported by the church ever since moving here. Being located at Grace Episcopal Church is, as we say, a great marriage between the church and Head Start. It's always been, even with different priests. We treat each other with respect. They do Christmas and Thanksgiving baskets for our families. We've joined in with the garden done by the church - they gave a piece of it to Head Start and we've planted carrots, sunflowers, and beans. I'm blessed to be here and being able to be here this long. I love it. I also wish there was no need for Head Start. That no one had to have the help, support, you know - that they had the better world. My sisters tell me I live in an alternate universe. They say, "You are always sitting in the positive part." And, I am because that's how things should be.

One way I've tried to make things better for families I work with is through teaching cooking. I did a lot of cooking workshops over the years with the parents. I called it survival skills, learning how to make stuff from scratch. Bread, holiday breads because people wanted to do gifts for different people. I taught them how to make and to decorate them. I taught them to make soups and stews from scratch, and then they could do it with their kids. We've done it at Head Start with bread dough where the kids make the first letter of their name, we bake it, and they eat it. They get to taste what real bread tastes like. I always told parents that anything you put in a pot can become a soup or a stew - you just thicken it. As a mom, I did a lot of crockpot cooking because my kids were athletes.

I used to cook for Jordan-Elbridge Head Start, too, out of the kitchen in Baldwinsville. The food was picked up and delivered to them. Some of those parents are back as great grandparents. Some of them have asked me if I'll do my bread workshops. That's a treat. The biggest enjoyment I have is when these kids come back as dads and moms. I don't totally like it because I wish they were able to have that part of their life a lot better - but they come back and their kids have fun and I'll say to the child, "Your daddy use to come here." They give you the funny look, you know. That's when I knew I was old - when I started making comments like that. Then, I knew I was really old when the kids started coming back with their grandchildren - I said, "Yea, I'm old now, can't fool anybody now."

Over time, I met a lot of people and different kids and staff. I was becoming friends with a lot of those people and we are still friends to this day. I have met many wonderful people throughout my years here. I have watched many powerful friendships develop between parents and children. I've seen a lot of moms make lifelong friends here. I always thought that was really special, especially for single moms with no support. I had my mom and grandmom and my sisters. Many of them don't have that.

After my first five years at PEACE, Inc., I thought "I'm going to be here." I love to cook so that was a plus. I just kept it going. I didn't even think. I was going to come back until I couldn't anymore. It's a nice place to be, not a stressful place. I was all for no stress. I was 29 when I started here and now I'm 69. I was just a kid. I started planning my retirement saying I didn't want to work past 70. Now I just want to be here until I can't - one day at a time and see how things go. This has been a huge part of my life. It's like a second family. I just grew to love the place. Being a part of PEACE, Inc. has been a great experience. I'm happy to have been a part of it.

My Head Start life has been very rewarding. I have touched many people with kindness and love, and have received much more back. My kids got a lot out of it, too. They are all married now. I have 11 grandchildren and one great grandchild. Three of my grandchildren went to Head Start. My middle child likes to share that he was a "welfare child" - now that he is successful. Life has been very good to me, especially giving me my Head Start families. Thank you PEACE, Inc. Head Start for being such a wonderful program that has helped and saved so many parents and children. Keep it going strong.