

Witness Testimony

US Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP)

Chuck Mills: My Personal Head Start Story

And

My Return on the Head Start Investment

By

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On

Getting the Most Bang for the Buck: Quality Early Education and Care

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Chairwoman Mikulski, Ranking member Burr, I am honored and humbled to testify before you today. I’m honored because who would have believed a kid from my neighborhood, located in the lower income area of Joliet, IL, affectionately known as “The Hill”, and from my childhood experiences would ever have the opportunity to come before our country’s most senior legislators, in these hallowed halls and describe the impact that the Head Start program has had on my life.

I would like to detail my personal Head Start story by first providing you a quick glimpse into where I am today personally and professionally, then give you how my childhood experiences and Head Start helped me achieve these successes. While my detailed bio has already been included for the record, please allow me to share a few highlights. I am a graduate of the US Naval Academy with a degree in mathematics. I joined the U. S. Marine Corps after graduation and became a helicopter pilot. I flew Cobra Helicopters and participated in the build-up to the first Gulf Conflict of 1990. I was subsequently selected to fly for Marine Helicopter Squadron One for Presidents George H. W. Bush and William J. Clinton. After nearly ten years of active military service, I made the decision to broaden my professional horizon and became a bond trader for Bear Stearns in New York City. After four hectic years working in New York City and having had my first child, my wife and I decided to return to Northern VA in 1999. This is when I started my first company, which provided short-term lending to small government contractors. Early in my company’s growth, I took a hiatus in 2001 and joined VA Governor, Mark Warner’s

administration as the Director of The Virginia Department of Business Assistance (VDBA), which is Virginia's equivalent to the federal Small Business Administration (SBA). After three years at the helm of VDBA, I returned to my entrepreneurial roots and have since started a second successful company which provides employee benefits services to government contractors. I am also a subject matter expert on matters involving economic development and small business growth and I am a regular speaker for the US State Department's international speaker's program. In addition, I sit on a number of important boards including George Mason University, and a community bank. While these are significant milestones, I consider my most important accomplishment is being Dad to my three children and my marriage to my wife of 22 years. Having never had a father or father figure and not having the conventional nuclear family experience, I consider my role as Dad and husband as paramount and my ultimate contribution to my family and community.

Having shared with you my adult successes, please allow me to now share with you my childhood experiences and the impact of Head Start on my life. First and foremost, it is important to know that my success could not have been possible without the one person that continues today to provide me the love, support and encouragement to be successful; that person is my wonderful mother. Having a mother that is always there for you sounds simple, but it was not always easy for her because by the time my mother was 22 years old, she had six children, all under the age of eight; she did not have a high school diploma; and she was a single mother. One could certainly argue that my mother made bad decisions and was ultimately responsible for her situation, however when taking into context her specific experiences, it is easy to understand how she found herself in this dilemma. But this is not a story of a poor, black, single mother who made bad choices; it is about how this typical woman with help from Head Start was able to raise two children who are now contributing members of our society.

My mother was an only child, raised by a single alcoholic mother who was never in a stable relationship. In fact, still today my mother does not know her father was. When she was a child, her mother frequently had different boyfriends visiting their home. When my mother was just a child one of those boyfriends in particular started sexually molesting her. My grandmother did not believe my mother when she was told of the abuse. Having no other recourse, took matters in her own hands and decided to marry early in order to remove herself from that awful situation. She was just 15 years old when she married my father, a Navy man.

My mother had six children, with me as the youngest, in seven years, which coincided with my father's return from long Navy deployments. After a few years of marriage, my father left the Navy. When he began living with us on a permanent basis, he began to physically abuse my mother and us, his children. Despite leaving high school to marry and having six children, my mother made another courageous decision to leave my father and begin life as a single mother.

My mother divorced my father when I was but three months old and I recall seeing him only twice in my life. I saw him once when I was about nine years old for approximately 15 minutes and the next time when I was 18 when he had passed away. Other than those two occurrences, he and I never had any contact, nor did he provide any support of any kind to our family. My mother did remarry once, however the marriage lasted for less than 2 year. There were no other male figures in my life, resulting in me having no notion of the concept of having a father. However for me that was ok because I had my mother, and I had my siblings and as far as I was concerned, that was all that I needed.

As you can probably imagine, my mother, a single black woman in the 60's, in the midst of the civil rights movement, with six kids and no support system had a very difficult road to travel. She found herself working two full-time labor intensive jobs all the while attempting to maintain a stable home to raise her children. Because of her jobs, my mother was not always at home; however she taught the six of us to work as a team. She also understood the importance of a good education and instilled in each of us that education is the key to success. Despite her lack of having a high school diploma, she recognized the fact that education is the great equalizer and that is why as soon as Head Start came into existence in 1965, she immediately put her two youngest children that were age appropriate into the program.

My mother was extremely grateful for Head Start as it provided me and my sister with our first introduction to reading, writing, and arithmetic. We moved around when I was a child and my sister and I attended Head Start in St. Louis, MO, my city of birth. The following year we moved to Shreveport, LA, my mother's place of birth, which is where I attended my second year of Head Start. I was extremely young so it is difficult to remember much about my Head Start experiences; however, my most vivid memory of my Head Start experiences includes the lunches and singing time. Even as my mother worked hard to ensure that our family always had food and clothing, despite our low-income status, I always looked forward to the delicious brown bag lunches that Head Start provided. Little did I know then that those "yummy" lunches were critical in providing me with the nutritional foundation to learn and live a healthy life as an adult. In addition, I strongly recollect the "circle times" and the many educational songs that we sang. According to my mother, I also became an avid reader, and gained a penchant for numbers and arithmetic during my Head Start experience, both traits which stick with me today.

I'm certain that the academic foundation that I received from Head Start is a key component to my success as a student. With the foundation I received at Head Start, academics came fairly easy to me throughout my K-12 years. It is interesting to note my sister, who also attended Head Start, also excelled in her studies. While academics for me was not terrible difficult, living in "The Hill" was a little bit tougher. I'll never forget when I was in 5th grade on a gloomy

Saturday morning when my mother came into my and my brother's room to tell me that my very best friend and fellow 5th grader, Anthony Townsend, had been shot and killed in his home the night before. For a typical 5th grader, such an experience would be difficult to understand; however in my neighborhood, and typical of many inner city neighborhoods, this was a normal occurrence within which children become immune to such tragedies. In fact and not uncommon with many families within the inner city, with my single mother working two jobs and being gone often, her two oldest children found ways to fill the void by making bad choices with regard to their friends and activities.

Growing up in "The Hill" also meant that I was bounded by the bigotry of low expectations. I recall as a child, my greatest enjoyment was to go to Chicago O'Hare Airport to watch aircraft take off and land. I was simply amazed by the sheer notion of watching tons of steel and metal and all of those people actually fly through the air like a bird. By the time I was 9 years old, my dream was to become a pilot and learn how to fly. When I was in middle school, I shared my dream to become a pilot with one of my favorite teachers, who had taught virtually every sibling of my family. This particular teacher loved our family and we equally loved her. She loved the fact that all of us took our studies seriously – a trait that my mother instilled and demanded of us. Like so many of our wonderful teachers, she found it her mission to both teach as well as protect the kids that parents had entrusted her with. So when I told her I wanted to be a pilot, she must have thought she was protecting me by telling me that aspiring to become a pilot while admirable, was probably not realistic. This teacher was taking into account where I lived and the fact that at that time in Joliet, IL there was literally a set a train tracks that ran through the city that separated the "haves" from the "have nots". Assuming that she was protecting me, this teacher that I simply loved, recommended that I set my sights on becoming a manager at the GE plant across the tracks because very few people from my neighborhood worked at the plant, let alone became a manager.

This was a significant blow to my young impressionable mind. However true to form, my mother made sure I did not lose my dreams. She reminded me of my Head Start experience and of the maturity, hard-work, never give up attitude, and leadership examples that my two different Head Start teachers provided me. My mother reminded me that becoming a pilot was not going to be easy but with hard work, a little bit of luck, and having others around you that share in your dream, all things are possible. It was clear at that moment in time, that Head Start had provided me with the foundation to not only succeed in life, but to also give back to my community and country as I was given in Head Start.

So what really is the impact of Head Start? I have told you about my mother and my five siblings and the fact that only the two youngest children had exposure to Head Start. The four oldest who did not get to experience Head Start unfortunately traveled tough and sometimes

tragic paths. My brother, the oldest, led a life of crime and spent much of his adult life incarcerated. My oldest sister led a very difficult life, which included struggling with drug addiction. Despite being in the midst of turning her life around, she passed away to a massive stroke prior to her 35nd birthday. Four months after my oldest sister passed away, my oldest brother also passed away prior to his 35nd birthday and while in jail. His official cause of death has never been uncovered. Of the two middle siblings, one has led a life of drugs and a dependence on government support for last 25 years. The other one has had some success, however struggles to maintain a consistent job. However, my one sister that attended Head Start is one of the most successful and foremost court reporters in Houston, TX. She has been a court reporter for over 25 years, owns numerous properties, and without a doubt has made the most of her Head Start experience.

I have provided you with my experiences to include how Head Start has opened doors for me even at an early age. If one were to use my family as a “control group” so to speak, it is clear that of the six children that were ultimately raised by the same mother, and with the same family values, they ended up in different places. What was the discriminating factor? I would contend that it is Head Start. Arguably there are other conditions that contributed to my sister’s and my accomplishments, but there is no denying that we were the only ones that attended Head Start and have progressed to our current station in life.

As a person that has served my country as a military officer, a state agency head, and now as a speaker for the US State Department, I believe my return on the Head Start investment of 44 years ago is clear. Having spent the last 17 years working within the finance and economic development arena, I personally value the economic impact Head Start has provided, which has included more than the clear social and early educational impact. My experiences as a military member; a successful entrepreneur who has hired employees; a board member on public and private organizations; and as a parent volunteer for my children’s schools and sports activities show that I’ve been able to contribute to the social and economic strength of my country and community. There is no doubt that the amount that was invested in my Head Start experience has been returned by a significant multiplier. I’d bet that return is similar for my sister through her contribution to our country’s judicial system and her private investments. Of course not every Head Start student will have the opportunities that me and my sister have had, however in my class of approximately 20 children, at least two graduates, who are contributing members of society and not dependent on the system, are arguably a measure of Head Start’s success. Over the last eight years I’ve met authors, mayors, entrepreneurs, Harvard professors, etc., all of whom are former Head Start students – again making great contributions to our society. The return on investment is clear, as my contribution will only be greater as, God willing, my children, grand children, and great grand children will also make contributions to our society. In fact my oldest child, who is in 8th grade, has his sights on attending Annapolis and becoming a

US Marine Corp pilot. I attribute much of who I am to the Head Start program and my life mission to be the father to my children that I never had in part is a result of the life-lessons I learned while in Head Start.

Thank you for my allowing me to be here today and allowing me to tell you my personal Head Start story.