



In Memoriam • Vanessa Ann Rich 1951-2015

by Emmalie Dropkin

The Head Start and early learning community lost a vibrant leader in Vanessa Ann Rich when she passed away on Sunday, December 27, 2015. Born in Monmouth, Illinois, in 1951, Vanessa began her career in early childhood when she wasn't so old herself. In the summer of 1965, the Head Start program launched in her hometown and Mrs. Roby, one of the few African American teachers in town, had the job of running the summer program. As Vanessa described it, her mother sent her on over to volunteer. A high school student at the time, she was responsible for delivering milk cartons to the classrooms and opening them for the children. She was delighted to feel she was contributing to the children's experience and inspired by the sophistication and leadership of the Head Start director — a lasting impression that would shape her life.

Over the next 40 years, Vanessa remained a remarkable early learning advocate — embracing and pursuing professional opportunities that honed her passion to expand opportunity for vulnerable children and families. She served as a Head Start director, trainer, consultant, higher education administrator, and ultimately as Deputy Commissioner for the Department of Family and Support Services for the City of Chicago, where the programs she led provided services to tens of thousands of children each year. Throughout her life, Vanessa saw herself as an advocate. She was present for the creation of the National Head Start Association in the 1980s and was the Chair of NHSA's Board at the time of her passing. She believed in using all the power and access she had to make things happen for children and families in her community, and her political savvy, determination, and positive glee in making change have surely left a permanent mark on the city of Chicago.

At a celebration of Vanessa's life in Washington, DC, a few weeks after her passing, colleagues and friends — and many who were both — remembered Vanessa's exuberant laughter, her spirit and optimism, and the sparkle she had that never flagged. Her son Seth spoke of her as a loving parent and grandparent who influenced his own journey from Head Start child to becoming a teacher and program leader himself.

As part of an interview series conducted several years ago by Dr. Jean Simpson, president of OMEP-USA, Vanessa was asked, "What would you like to be remembered about you?" Here is her answer in her own words:

"Gosh, I don't know. I really don't know. I am blessed. I do have children, I do have grandchildren, and I know that I will always be. And I believe that spiritually. . . . You remember the old African conversation when they talked about the craftsman who spent his entire life building the brick that went into the wall? And he was very happy because he knew that his son would come along and do the next one, and the next one. So he spent his time only crafting the most perfect brick. He didn't need to worry about finishing the wall. Just crafting this brick that was his life. Because the next one would be crafted perfectly, too. So that's the way I look at it. My life is about crafting what I do here perfectly, as best as I can. And the best I can has to be perfect. 'Cause that's what God did. And so when I make my transition, it will carry on. 'Cause I'm standing on somebody else's brick, and they stood on other bricks."