

yes we can!

by Bettye Caldwell

America has just inaugurated a new President, and, thanks to modern technology, we were all there. Actually there should have been a special grandstand for early childhood personnel along the parade route with a poster in front proclaiming: "We helped achieve President Obama's Victory." Probably few of the pundits analyzing voting patterns will give the early childhood field much credit for the victory, but we deserve our share. This realization came to me on election night as I watched those exultant young adult voters in Grant Park in Chicago, many of whom were voting for the first time, celebrating their role in the victory. And, indeed, they had a right to do so, as young adults overwhelmingly chose Candidate Obama and helped put him over the top. As I watched their glee I could not suppress the slightly arrogant reaction, "Those are my children, and the children of countless co-workers in early childhood, grown up and functioning as effective citizens." Granted, not all of them attended one of our programs, but many



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Dr. Julius B. Richmond, is often cited as having helped provide the foundation to Head Start. In Little Rock, she launched and guided the Kramer Project, often described as a "school for the future."

of them undoubtedly did. And, without the kind of start we helped them obtain, they might not have cared who got elected. We not only believed in them, but we set about designing programs and conducting research to demonstrate the correctness of our beliefs. It was a good feeling, and every worker in the child care and education vineyard should share it. President Obama may not know about our role in his election, but we should be aware of and celebrate it.

In retrospect one can often find multiple dots of the same idea on individual history page, just waiting for someone to come along and connect them and reveal the big picture. So it has been with early childhood. In 1961, the year of President Obama's birth, an important dot could be found in Murphreesboro, Tennessee, where Dr. Susan Gray was operating an exciting early childhood project designed to help poor children get ready for the formal schooling that lay ahead. Another dot could be found in New York City, where Drs. Martin and Cynthia Deutsch were extending their kindergarten work with disadvantaged children down to younger ages. Still another dot existed in Syracuse, New York, in the research Dr. Julius B. Richmond and I were conducting with under-educated mothers and their infants. This research brought into sharp focus the reality that many children

lacked the intellectual and emotional foundation necessary for optimal development. Building on this knowledge, we established the Children's Center, generally called (perhaps undeservedly) the first infant enrichment program in America. Moving west, around the same time, Dr. David Weikart was tooling up in Ypsilanti, Michigan, for the Perry Preschool Project, perhaps the most influential of those early dots. (There were undoubtedly others, equally important, but not as well-known and thus not cited.) Interestingly, at the time, none of us knew about the work of the others. We were all working independently, with little professional or financial support, confident that we had hold of an idea whose time had come. But in the early '60s, history had not provided a mechanism for connecting the dots. That happened officially in 1965, with the launching of Head Start. The rest, as we say, is history. The jubilation of the young adults on election night was something of a delayed commencement exercise for them.

But we would not be able to claim a role in these watershed events if the field of early childhood itself had not grown and changed during this same time period. There are not too many people still alive who remember the attitudes and practices of the early childhood establishment in 1961. (At 84, I am one of

them.) Around that time, many national leaders strongly resisted embracing what was called 'day care,' afraid that it would somehow contaminate the sacred territory of early childhood education. They were not willing to assign a dot to this 'inferior' pattern of service. It took many years for leaders — professors, curriculum developers, community leaders — to accept the reality that 'day care' was what many families wanted and needed. But when that recognition finally took hold (over the period of roughly 1976 to 1988), it was good for both 'dots,' both varieties of service. For early education it meant a more pragmatic and realistic orientation; for day care it meant improved training, more consistent quality, and higher status in the community. The merger put many more dots onto the map and resulted in a vastly improved design when all were connected.

By the way, while I have been highlighting the debt that President Obama owes to us for the help we provided all those young voters, I should give at least a small amount of coverage to a debt we owe his campaign. Don't you wish that, 50 years ago, we had adopted as our professional slogan: Yes We Can. Maybe it's not too late.