EVENT SPEECH

FOR

JOHN HALES

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. It’s bright and early and I am here for several reasons, one of which is to acknowledge the success and the “can do” attitude of all of the participants in our programs, another is to recognize the support so willingly shared by our community partners, and…. well, there’s one more thing…. in the process I intend to dispel the myth set forth by the legendary wit, Oscar Wilde, who so brazenly said, “Only dull people are brilliant at breakfast.” (**You can say this with a deadpan face and wait for the laugh**). The accomplishments of our teams and the dedication demonstrated by the leaders and management are so inspiring that by the time I’m done, if he were still alive and here, Mr. Wilde would have been speechless… no mean feat for him!! (**HS note- I will add more accurate details as you provide them- this is just a sample based on the initial information given**).

I would also like to invoke the words of Francis Bacon (**You can add …”pun sort of intended as this IS breakfast**”) who said, “Hope is a good breakfast…” I would like to add that goals, intentions, and positive outreach such as the work being done here at Head Start all provide incredible, lasting, and reinforcing sustenance for the families and children we serve and we all have great reason to be very proud.

We are here this morning to nourish not only our selves but also our souls… and our intentions and dedication to our communities and no matter what role we have assumed in the sustenance of our society, it’s time to realign and recommit to a new reality. Our progress over the years has been admirable but our population and its problems grow geometrically. If you think of this year’s motif for this 43rd Annual Conference and Expo, it will be clear that we are all in the right place at the right time. What is more appropriate or more perfect than mining this year’s theme, “The Next Generation of Opportunity?” It’s something we all think about. Now it’s time to work together to find the vision and road map that leads to a viable, inclusive, and productive future for our kids and their families.

We don’t need to go too much further than to the words of some of history’s great thinkers to begin our onward path. We have to remember life is kinetic. It is in constant movement… not always in the directions we intend, but with alertness, intention, intelligence, and teamwork, we can prevail as we battle demons that threaten our families and children. Wise men like Cesar Chavez said, “…Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own.” And while Benjamin Franklin teaches us, “Without continual growth and progress, such words as improvement, achievement, and success have no meaning,” so I ask you, what do those words mean to you? How do we dissect, analyze and reconstitute improvement, achievement, and success?

As we focus on the future, I think it is critical to embrace the reality that life, as we know it, is very different than it used to be, and while the fundamental issues facing our communities travel with us across generations, the means by which we confront and handle them need to be constantly reassessed. It is a tremendous accomplishment that since its inception in 1965, Head Start has helped more than 32 million children and their families prepare for school and life. According to information from the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2015 35.2 million children will have been enrolled in grades pre-kindergarten through 8th grade. By comparison, a report from the census bureau with information going back to the 1960’s briefly breaks it down as follows:

* In October 1999, 94 percent of 5-year old children were enrolled in school
* It’s hard to believe that in 1969 only about 11 percent of the kindergarten aged population attended kindergarten all day. That proportion rose to 58% in 1999.
* The population of the US in 1964 was 191.1 million
* By comparison, in a little more than fifty years, the US population has grown to over 320 million people.

In other words…. more children… more chances for challenge and more opportunities to support positive impact.

The population has almost doubled in the span of two generations. And you know what? Commonalities transcend generations. We all have one thing we share: Each and every one of our fellow neighbors that live on this planet and in this country with us are equally entitled to have the opportunity to succeed in life.

I ask you again: How do we improve? How do we achieve? How do we succeed? First of all, I want to acknowledge all of you for being here. You have already self-identified and the fact that you are here at this conference and up this early having breakfast with all of us clearly demonstrates your commitment to the quality of life for the youth- the **FUTURE** of this country. You may not openly declare yourselves. You may not blow your own trumpet, but we got it. **YOU** **CARE**. And for that we are humbled and grateful. Now, knowing that you care, how do we up the game? How do we strengthen our commitment to Head Start and to this nation’s young people? What are the new ways in which we can instill success with profound and system shifting achievements? I don’t know if I personally know the answer, but I do know we have each other as sounding boards.

I also know that as a society we are more connected to each other and the rest of the world more than ever before.

On that note we also have technology to provide us with new tools and conduits to lead us to inspiration and success, and maybe not in the more traditional ways we may have indulged in the past. I want to tell you a story that I heard of as a means to encourage all of us to think a little differently- to think about how to share our mission and get the word out for all of the good we do here at Head Start. We have seen that although any one of us has, at any moment, the opportunity to really have a profound and positive effect on the lives of others, it is the will of the true leader that inspires those around him or her. There is an online blog called “Humans Of New York.” Some of you may have heard of it. It is run by a young man named Brandon Stanton who is bringing to light the stories of people… real humans like you and me… and although some of his stories focus on brief interviews with anonymous souls in Central Park or Grand Central Station, every so often, his involvement has incredible outreach. One day last year in Brownsville, a very tough and marginalized section of Brooklyn, he saw a young boy on the street, took his picture, and asked him a simple question, “Who has influenced you the most in your life?” And the boy named Vidal replied, “Mrs. Lopez.” Mrs. Lopez is the principal at his school, the Mott Hall Bridges Academy. Vidal explained his selection. “ When we get in trouble, she doesn’t suspend us. She calls us to her office and explains to us how the system was built down around us… she tells us that each time somebody fails out of school a new prison cell gets built. And one time she made every student stand up one at a time and told us that **we matter**.” For her part, Ms. Lopez was ready to hand in her resignation. She was frustrated and about to give up any hope that her mission was heard. She too, needed to know she mattered. And then the story hit the Internet and people began to learn why Ms. Lopez is such a leader. She refers to her students as **scholars**. She treats everyone with dignity and respect. The families of the scholars, as well as the scholars, attend orientation so everyone knows what to expect from being involved with this school… and they have to comply. Once scholars are accepted they must attend a summer program so that they can familiarize themselves further with the school protocols. And while she used to raise money to try and take one or two students each year on a trip to Harvard to let them know “This is possible… for **YOU**,” thanks to the exposure from Brandon Stanton and his blog, over 1.2 million dollars was raised to endow future trips for all students of Mott Hall Bridges Academy… and both Vidal and Ms. Lopez got to go to Washington DC to meet President Obama. I tell you this story to remind all of us that everyone wants to be treated with dignity and respect (**Do you want to add)** which doesn’t have to put any kind of financial strain into a budget. Honoring one’s fellow human being is **priceless**…. and it’s **free**. There are many ways to make a difference in young lives. That’s what a true leader does.

As you think of that small story that began with one photo on an Instagram feed, I invite you to begin the process of considering how you might take your projects from compliance… very capable and admirable compliance… to **EXCELLENCE**. Sometimes we all seem too timid to dare…. to go that extra step. It’s time to innovate and demonstrate next level leadership. Our kids and our families really need it. John Quincy Adams once said, “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you’re a leader.”

Sometimes in an intellectual or artistic process it is essential to repeatedly look within the context of the work and focus, digging through layers of all non- essential matter to eventually discover the essence of one’s cause and mission. While we continue to run an increased risk of getting tangled up in webs of rhetoric and paper traps, it is our mandate to maintain focus on why we do what we do. So many of you are talented, intelligent, and versatile, …but none of you as individuals, no matter how formidable your talents may be, can operate in a vacuum. Part if what we do… no, **ALL** of what we do is **collaboration**. Each one of you has your distinctions. You are unique. And you have the opportunity to be nourished, supported, and partnered with those that compliment your skills and energy. Think of your colleagues and their strengths and “growth opportunities.” Are your clients reaping optimal benefits from your current team structures? What can you, as leaders, institute that would further empower your groups to guide them into a productive and successful future?

I also want to give you some food for thought about thinking of ways in which you can reach out to community partners and engage them in the process of supporting, promoting, and empowering future generations. There will always be societal challenges. If Utopia exists, please text me the directions! (**Wait for the laugh**), …But while we wait and imagine a world in which each child has an even and fair shake at life, we cannot understate the urgency of needing to encourage community partners to participate in our programs. Although the National Head Start Program does an excellent job of creating a context within which we function and grow, we also have to focus on local entities to encourage and support community initiatives. As well as there are “locavore” movements gaining traction in other areas of our culture, it is important to see where innovations and connections within our own neighborhoods and cities might provide support. Here too, we must be creative, bold, and innovative in our thinking and marketing strategies. A successful Head Start program has **NO** down side. Young people who are shown respect, who are eager to learn, who say no to the darker aspects of living a marginalized life are the citizens of the future. I want to believe that if we can do whatever possible to eradicate ignorance, we also solve a host of other socio economic issues. Until all of the businesses and civic leaders in each neighborhood are involved in some way in our programs, there is more work to do!

We all know our mission and if we’re in this room, we have accepted the gauntlet that has been thrown at our feet. This organization exists to serve and support each and every child, their families, and their communities. You… **We** … are doing an admirable job to insure every child has an equitable start in life. I am proud to have partners and colleagues like you who have made so many significant contributions to the children of this country and I look forward with enthusiasm and anticipation to learn of the next levels of achievement that will be accomplished in the name of encouraging and educating respectful, respected, knowledgeable, and prepared future generations. Talk about **renewable energy**!!! It is our children and their unlimited potential!

I want to acknowledge all of you and thank you for inspiring me to focus and do even more. As we go forward as a team, I wish for all of you clarity, vision, focus, determination, and positive impact. This world needs it and so do our kids. Thank you all and here’s to next year!

**(HS 5/5- if there are any specific initiatives or bits of information you want to have included, let me know and I will add them for you. Thanks**!)