Early childhood education is the most valuable point in the life of a child to help them grow into their full potential. Mistakenly, it is often misunderstood simply as babysitting or playtime for children. For Patti LaRue caring for children is not a job but a passion that she has devoted herself to for twenty seven years. She describes herself as a gardener of humanity with the children she works with. “like a flower seed, they were planted here and now they are a strong beautiful flowers who need to be replanted and go to kindergarten.” Patti knew from a very young age that she wanted to care for people more vulnerable than herself. She was determined to become a veterinarian or a early education professional. But after dissecting a frog in seventh grade she discovered that working with animals was “not my route.” Not being able to afford a four year college she went to community college for two years until she could get the credits to transfer to Roosevelt University and graduate with a bachelor's degree focused in Early Childhood Education.

While earning her degree Patti enrolled her children in the Head Start program and actively volunteered in their classrooms for two years. Upon graduation she applied for a job at the Albany Park Community Center (APCC) and has worked here ever since.

For Patti, communication is key in every aspect of the child care process. Her teaching assistant Claudia Quinones is an incredibly valuable resource and their relationship is an important example for the children on how to interact with other people. She stresses how “they are little people and their minds are like a sponge you don’t know it but they're taking everything in.”
So how does Patti interact with children knowing that they will never forget how she treats them: with love, care, and support especially when they do something wrong. Patti notes, “We have to keep giving them reminders [of the rules] throughout the day. But [we also] let them know that nobody is perfect. They get so worked up when they spill something and we let them know that nobody is perfect: that people spill things. That’s why we have paper towels, to clean it.” It is these small, positive interactions with the children that Patti believes make a good early childhood educator.

Additionally, Patti believes it’s very important to work with the parents of children because, “parents are the first teachers.” APCC and Patti set up a home visit with the families before classes begin to help establish expectations of what the parents would like the children to achieve. The meetings also help the children more easily transition to a classroom setting. They also have two parent teacher conferences so that the parents can understand how things like play and socialization benefit their children. While Patti says many parents are doubtful during the home visits, by the first conference she says they are surprised to say, “they’re getting very independent, they were serving themselves food, cleaning up and taking responsibility”. It is clear by working with the parents Patti is able to use her professional skills to make sure the child is able to succeed.

However, the road to success in early childhood education is not always paved with ease. The importance of Head Start funding can not be understated when it comes to keeping early education programs operating. For Patti, this means collecting data is extremely important. While she and Claudia are teaching their children the fundamental social and emotional skills necessary to continue their growth, they must also record tangible metrics to show that the children in their classroom are successfully reaching standards determined by parents, teachers, and Head Start. Even with an Aid like Claudia, Patti finds it incredibly difficult to balance these two responsibilities. However, Pattie understands how necessary both sides are to continue the important work she is doing.
Despite the difficulties of being an Early Education teacher, Patti has seen much success within her children. One of her earliest students was an Arab girl whose family could not speak English. Patti recently heard from one of the girl's cousins, who revealed that she recently graduated with a law degree from Northeastern. More recently, Patti has helped teach a boy with autism. When he came to school, “he was in diapers, he could not talk, he would not make eye contact. Now he writes his name, blows kisses and he is even talking.” This incredible transformation is only possible with professionals like Patti who think outside of the box about academic exercises for three year olds and work to create the soft skills required to work in an school environment.

Patti LaRue believes every child is like a flower. They come to her as three year olds, seeds, barely able to speak and they leave blossoming, writing their names and reading story books, having all the necessary skills to flower in elementary school and later in life.

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