



Honoring The Leaders of Early Learning!

In honor of Women's History Month, SELF would like to recognize women leaders in the field of Early Child Care Education. We have three compelling stories that we would like to share. We are grateful to the women featured this month for their passion, devotion, and dedication to the children and families they serve. I am personally honored to know and work with them. With Gratitude,

Debbie Ham
Executive Director

We had the pleasure of talking with **Jodi Wall, MS, the Executive Director of Early Care and Education (ECE) at Educational Service District 112 (ESD 112).**

Jodi has worked in ECE for over 20 years. Jodi's early experiences shaped her, "At my core, from a very early age, I knew that I had a passion for children." She recalls volunteering in her mom's classroom. Her mom's deep care for the children in her class helped foster Jodi's passion for young children. Jodi's mom always told her and her students "you can do anything you set your mind to". Jodi has passed on that same sentiment to her own children.

Jodi entered college interested in both Psychology and Early Childhood Development. The turning point in her academic career was learning about brain development and how critical the first five years are for a child. In addition to her education, she set out to experience as many ECE opportunities as possible. To that end, she's been a Head Start teacher, family child care assistant, toddler and preschool teacher, assistant child care director, coach, home visitor, adjunct faculty member and trainer. Today she oversees numerous programs in 7 counties that provide services to children from birth - 12 years and their families, as well as professional development and support for ECE professionals.

Jodi recently spoke with a grandmother of a child in one of their programs. The grandmother acknowledged life hasn't been easy for her grandchildren, but she said, "I fiercely love my grandchildren and I will do anything for them". Jodi said every day she asks herself what are we doing to support people like her? She believes parents are the child's first and most important teacher and our ECE programs and systems should be designed to be responsive to what families need. This is why she believes we need a mixed delivery system of ECE services and this is one of the things she loves about what the ESD is able to offer.

Jodi was fortunate to grow up in a home where she felt supported, safe, and loved. Her hope is that every child will know they have somebody or a group of somebodies that love and support them so that they can "do anything they set their minds to."

Thank you, Jodi, for your commitment to children and families. We are better because of the work and devotion that you share with our community.

Find out more about Educational Service District 112 (ESD 112) on their website at esd112.org.

Recently we had a chance to chat with **Rekah Strong M.S.W. the CEO of EOCF (Educational Opportunities for Children and Families) to gain a better understanding of her journey and why Early Care and Education is so important to her.**

Rekah recalled a moment that brought tears to her eyes. She was attending a conference as a member of the Clark College Board of Trustees in Washington DC, with a keynote from Dr. Jill Biden. During Rekah's flight home,

she reflected on the juxtaposition of learning from, and conversing with, national leaders versus the experience of being raised in a rough North Portland neighborhood living in public housing; a living experience that made her embarrassed. How was it that even with limited resources, she was still able to rise above her circumstances? To pursue her PhD, or become an organization leader who garners community-wide successes? How did she get here?

She knew the answer, immediately. Her ability for this growth, was due to the love and devotion from her mother who put an emphasis on Education. From an early age, Rekah's mother instilled that education was the equalizer. The key to her success.

In full circle, Rekah is currently leading one of the largest Early Childhood Educational organizations in SW Washington, which provides high-quality services and support for young children and their families. Rekah wants every child to experience a world outside of what they may be experiencing in the immediate. She wants her children and families to know that there is a much bigger world and purpose for their lives. Rekah is proud of the impact EOCF is making in SW Washington with the measurable, generational impacts that affect the child, their parents, their caregivers, their foster family, their neighborhoods - our community.

A special thanks to Rekah for her commitment to the support and opportunities EOCF is continuing to provide for nearly 55 years. We admire her resilience and determination, setting the tone for future leaders in our community.

Learn more about the impact of EOCF and the programs available, at eocfwa.org.

We had the pleasure of chatting with **Mel Partridge, Early Education & Employment Services Director with Innovative Services NW. As we started the conversation her gaze moved over toward her office window where she could see bubbles floating past. Upon further investigation, she could see children playing with a parachute on the playground.**"These kids are our next generation; we need to invest in them."

When Mel was a teenager, she started working in her mother's preschool classroom, it was at that moment that she knew that she wanted to work with children. After a few jobs that lead her outside the Early Child Care Education field, she naturally found her way back. She recalls standing in line where she caught the attention of a small boy, they carried on a conversation for a while. In the same line was a woman who had been watching the interaction, she asked if she could hire her, which lead her to a career at Innovative Services NW. Mel is still in contact with that little boy, now a 21-year-old young man. "We don't always understand our impact until we have these moments of reflection." It was because of her love and devotion that this young man received the resources that he needed to become a productive, self-sufficient young adult.

Although this is a challenging field on so many levels, Mel's positive attitude keeps her going, she has moved through the ranks from one-on-one classroom aide, lead teacher, program support, advocate, supervisor and director. She is now pursuing her master's degree to better serve the families and staff that she supports. She strives for a community that will put children first, recognize the importance of Early Child Care Education, and partner with families to help them gain the services that they need to better their situation.

Thank you, Mel, for your love and support for these children and families. Our community is a better place because of you. Learn more about Innovative Services NW by visiting their website at innovativeservicesnw.org.

DONATE