

Terri Lynne Lokoff Teacher Awards
“What Makes Me an Outstanding Teacher?”

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Confucius once said, “Everything has beauty but not everyone sees it.” When I was told that I was selected in the top ten for the Terri Lynne Lokoff Teacher Awards and would be asked to write an essay on what makes me an outstanding teacher I was elated, humbled, and found thinking about what sets me apart from the hundreds, even thousands, of other deserving early childhood educators. I began to think about how being a professional in this field and making an impact on the children, parents, my program, and the community has led some to call me an “outstanding teacher.” However, it is not that I just have these attributes backed by qualifications that can be listed on my resume. It is because behind each of these qualities is passion, heart, and the ability to see the beauty of childhood.

From an early age I knew I wanted to work with young children. I can remember being that “mother hen” to all the toddlers at family functions and the spark that ignited in me the day I read “Kristy’s Big Idea” from *The Babysitters Club* book series. Maybe it was because the lead character and I shared the same name, but from that point on I was driven to become a teacher of young children. I spent my teen years learning all I could about early childhood. I would take any parenting, babysitting, or child development classes my high school had to offer. I would wake up at 4am every morning so I could watch Dr. T Berry Brazelton on the TV before the school bus came. I even did my graduation project on being a childcare teacher where I got a job at a local childcare center along my school’s bus route. I knew this was what I was meant to do. I was set for life, or so I thought, with the skills I obtained from Dr. Brazelton and the babysitter club girls. I even asked my high school teacher to write a letter to the college I was attending saying I knew enough to just skip all the child development classes and have them give me my degree. At a young age, I was so ambitious. I had the drive, passion, spark, and the heart to instruct young children and see the beauty of what makes childhood so important. It was clear this was my purpose in life. I just had a lot of growing to do in the field of professionalism, but I did grow... eventually.

After years working as for others in childcare centers, I felt distraught. I met too many teachers who just did not have the passion for this field. I never understood how they could not see the beauty of childhood and how the magic of play was missing from their souls. So, I decided it was time to take my passions, dreams, and fuel this desire to show others how incredible childhood is by starting my own program where childhood would be respected and everyday would leave the children saying they had the best day ever!

I have had many influences in my life who have supported, encouraged, and driven me to succeed, but I hold one person accountable for setting the wheels in motion for me to grow as a professional. This person was my licensing inspector who at the time asked me why I was not pursuing higher goals because she thought I had what it took. That was it. I took what I thought I had known and began to dive back into professional development trainings, books, and anything else I thought might prove useful. I contacted my state's accreditation department and told them I was going for the highest ranking they had for childcare providers. They said to treat the scale as stairs and work my way up. I was determined to introduce them to my ambition in a "hold my juice box" fashion. It was then that I had the most important lesson in professionalism, becoming humble. It became clear that I should have listened to them. After becoming overwhelmed with the entire process and thinking I knew it all, I found myself struggling. I dropped out and quit the entire program. I took some time to reflect, took a step back, and readied myself to become a learner. I asked for a mentor and from that moment I embraced the philosophies of "good, better, and best" and "continuous quality improvement." I took the knowledge from my mentor, enrolled back into college, finished my Bachelor of Early Childhood Education, got my Master of Early Childhood Education, earned my CDA and Directors' Credential, became the only Nature Explore certified family childcare in the state of Pennsylvania at the time, passed my accreditation inspection through the National Association for Family Child Care, and obtained my STAR 4 accreditation through the PA Keystone STARS program.

Gaining those accolades was the turning point for me as a professional. I had now gone from the student to the teacher who could go out and change my community in a positive way. Being able to humble myself made me realize I am always growing it helped me to see the beauty in helping others grow. Within my community, I became a mentor and began working with other early childhood teachers to help improve themselves as educators as well as give them support for the children in their programs. I quickly realized that more providers needed mentoring than was available in my state, so I set up an online network group to help childcare teachers in my community and across the state of Pennsylvania connect and collaborate with one another. Early childhood teachers now had a way to connect with other teachers daily. The network group has grown substantially over the years and is used as a place for childcare teachers to express ideas, get clarification on state regulations, get

business support, find resources for the families and children in their care, and to help others grow as professionals through continuous growth and knowledge shared by so many wonderful providers.

There had come a point in my career where I wanted to do more for the families and children in my community. I was given the opportunity to become an early intervention therapist doing working as a special instructor. I had the privilege of going into the homes of families in my community and working one on one with parents and children. There, I was able to share my knowledge of child development and help parents and caregivers assist their children in meeting developmental milestones. It was such a wonderful experience, and I am grateful for that opportunity because it allowed me to look at my own teaching practices and reevaluate them. I was able to take what I had been doing with early intervention and apply it the children that I serve.

One thing that has set my program apart from others is my ability to see and respect the importance of play. This philosophy of mine had gone full throttle when I took knowledge from early intervention and used it to replace my current teaching practices. The effects of this on the children in my care were seen from day one. I always wanted every day to be “the best day ever,” but I had gotten so caught up on what was the “norm” in early childhood education that I forgot to think outside the box. I was doing what teachers were taught. 9am circle time, 9:30am art, 10:00am outside, 10:30am game, et cetera. I had the best activities planned. I mean, if I could show you the handprint cows we made you would say they should be hanging in the Louvre next to the Mona Lisa. However, I had to ask myself if this was exciting for me or was this exciting for the kids? How was this style of teaching affecting the children, and how could I go from what I was doing and make it better or the best? What I learned from my time with early intervention was that there are no fancy therapeutic toys or skillfully planned exercises. Early intervention is done with what is already in the child’s environment through play, following the child’s interests, and through therapists who are equipped with the knowledge of child development.

My cow activity was pretty awesome, but those children did not care what my handprint cow was doing on my hypothetical farm. They cared about what a worm was doing crawling along their sandbox as they called out to me excitedly, and that was it. I ditched the lesson plans, pitched the premade teacher cutouts, and sat in the dirt just watching their learning unfold. I became the Jane Goodall of early childhood education watching these young children process their environment. I stayed back as spectator hoping that they would call me over into

their play. I eagerly waited for a chance to be invited into their world. I had a newfound respect for play and knew that I, as an adult, was only allowed in when invited. My job was to set up the environment for them based on their developmental needs, learning goals, and interests. As those who follow the Reggio Emilia philosophy to education know, the environment is the third teacher in their triangle of education.

Once I allowed the environment to become that third teacher and I took on my role as facilitator and observer, I could see a significant impact on the children in my care. They were no longer confined to 30-minute activities of adult-directed ideas. They had the reins and were in control of their learning paths for the day, and they were thriving because of it! Children could now choose to work in art for hours where the end result was all about the process not the product. They could build block cities that stay erect for weeks, where they can keep designing and adding to their creations. Children also have the option to spend all nine hours outside. They call the shots because true learning is done through play that is always child initiated and directed and should not be disturbed. Despite me knowing what best practice was, I had to make sure that the parents understood not only the value in this form of education, but their role in it. I knew my role was the second teacher, and their role was the first teacher to their own children.

I strive every day to make an impact so that parents know they are the first teachers in their child's lives. A thought process that never fully developed until I myself became a parent, and could appreciate the magnitude of trusting another individual with my babies. I want parents to have the tools, knowledge, and passion to foster their relationships and be a part of their children's early childhood experience. I feel so privileged to be a part of their children's daily lives, and I want to spend those years not being seen as just a business they found on Google Maps that had an opening, but as a person who is here to support them along the way. I want to be a tool they can turn to when they have questions. I want to be a resource they can use when they need to advocate for their child. More importantly, I want to be a place where parents come and experience the beauty of relationships that can come from a loving program that puts families and children first.

The program that I created was never designed to grow and expand past the walls of my home. No, my program that I envisioned years ago as an ambitious, know it all, *Babysitters Club* enthusiast was and still is meant to do extraordinary things, but it is meant to do it by sharing the beauty of childhood with those who come through

the doors of my home. It is meant to do this by constantly growing and never forgetting about the beauty that is all around us. It is in childhood, it is in the worm on the sandbox, it is in the relationships we form, and it is in the memories we make.

In conclusion, I must be completely honest. I almost passed up the opportunity to write this essay. After receiving the news that I was selected for the award, I got the news that my godfather had unexpectedly passed. I really had no desire to write about my accomplishments because one of my biggest supporters was not going to be here to cheer me on and tell me how proud he was of me. It was not until I was sitting at his funeral and heard so many people speak about how great of a person he was, and the one common theme was how he saw “beauty” in everything. That was when the flame inside of me that felt smothered was reignited. All the memories of my childhood came rushing back. As a child I did not attend childcare. I spent my whole childhood growing up at my godparents’ house. Being able to look at the beauty in life came from what I was taught through my early childhood experiences with them. My godfather may not be here in person today, but his words of encouragement and praise are forever embedded in my memory. For every professional goal I have accomplished, I can remember his words of encouragement. The pride that he displayed with every opportunity I was given to serve in our community and help others will be used by me to keep doing those works. I will not forget how he validated every heartfelt parent letter or review that was left about the positive effects I have had on children and families, and lastly how he was just amazed that I never stop striving to make my program better.

So, when I think back to the question posed for this essay, “What makes you an outstanding childcare professional?” I can answer it by quoting Confucius. “Everything has beauty but not everyone sees it.” I am an outstanding childcare professional because I have been shown how to see the beauty that not everyone can see. I am in this profession because I see the beauty in childhood, I see the beauty in play, I see the beauty in knowledge, I see the beauty in relationships, and I see the beauty in that tiny worm that made such a substantial impact on my teaching philosophies. From an ambition teenager who once sat on a hillside with a notebook and a friend listing out my ambitious ideas, I can now proudly say I am outstanding. I am an outstanding early childhood teacher because I cannot imagine spending my day doing anything else, and I was never given a reason, by so many, to not believe I was anything less than outstanding at what I do.