

Family Focus Participant Staff Speech
Presented at the 2018 Family Focus Gala, May 15, 2018
Shantel Smith, Resource Coordinator



“My name is Shantel Smith. I came to Family Focus when I was 17. I was going into my senior year of high school and I was pregnant. In my mind I thought I knew what I was doing. I babysat before so I knew how to change a diaper, feed and burp a baby so why did I need to go to Family Focus? On my first day of group I expected to be Ms. Know-it-all. But I was totally wrong. I was clueless.

It was especially hard because it was senior year of high school. Your friends have cars, homecoming is coming up and everyone is excited about college because we’re finally leaving this place. But I knew in my mind I wasn’t going away to school. That was a harsh reality that I had to face. I knew wherever I went I would be home with my mom.

When you are pregnant at 17 years old it seems like the odds are against you. You look at stats like 90% of women who have children while still in high school end up on welfare, don’t graduate on time, don’t go to college, and end up working retail. It’s like the future is planned for you and it doesn’t look bright. But at Family Focus it was so different.

Family Focus embraces you for who you are. They’re here for your progress as an asset to the community. You’re not another application or another case number like you are at other places. At Family Focus, they see your individuality. They want you to succeed. I was told, ‘Yes, you have a baby now but you can do it. You can be successful. This is not where you will remain. Whatever statistics you see does not have to be you.’ It felt really good to hear that because I didn’t hear that at home.

Everyone at Family Focus said I was going to be someone, I could take care of myself and my children. I would finish my education and graduate on time and do greater things.

When I had people believe in me, I became more confident. It made me pay attention more in school. Before getting pregnant I was a C student. After attending group at Family Focus, I became an A+ student. I think I always had it in me but after getting pregnant I felt like I needed to show that I can graduate on time, I am intelligent, I can do this work and can have this baby so I just have to prove it to everyone. I was proud of that.

When my Family Focus home visitor came to see me after I had the baby, we discussed goals. I told her that I wanted to be in school and still be Shantel. Not just ‘the girl with the baby.’ And I wanted to go to college. I wanted to know if that was still possible. Not only was it possible, but on my first day of college my home visitor drove me to the door and said, ‘Get in there, Shantel!’

But there were challenges. I had to get to school on the train everyday but didn’t have the money. I knew I needed a job. That’s when I learned about the 21st Century After School program at Family Focus. I was called into Loretta’s office. Looking at Loretta, you think, ‘Boss.’ She’s the big boss. When she called me in I thought I was in trouble. I hoped I didn’t say anything rude in group because I have a bit of a mouth, or my mom didn’t come in acting crazy. Instead, Loretta said, ‘You’re going to work at Bond Elementary School for our after-school program. I want you to be a teacher’s aide.’ I got excited and asked, ‘I’m going to get paid?’ and she said, ‘Yes - It’s a job.’”

Shantel Smith/Family Focus Participant Staff Speech (continued)

“It is amazing molding my own afterschool program, taking children to plays and museums, bringing in STEM activities, showing off their artwork, and talking to parents. I love it. Being a Resource Coordinator means I'm part of the team at Family Focus. I come to meetings. I take notes. The staff wants to hear what I have to say. It's not about my personal life anymore. It's about the work I do. That felt really good. I felt important.

I learned a lot about how to be a staff member from being a participant first. My mom had a rude tone when she gave me advice. There was no question my mom cared, but she didn't know how to deliver it. So now I work on my delivery. I must let my participants know that I care. I'm not someone coming in from the suburbs telling you what to do with your child. I'm from Englewood. Ms. Smith is from the 'hood and they can talk to me. I've been where these parents are. I've stood in line at the aid office. I've been in line at unemployment. I've struggled in school. I know what it's like when you're looking for someone to help you. That's where I come in. I bring these resources to make life a little bit easier. I want them to know it doesn't stop here. You can always move forward. My children are here tonight. And that is my message to my children. We can all keep moving forward.

If someone asked me why they should support Family Focus, I would say ‘Look what happens when you DON'T.’ A young girl is out on her own with a baby. She doesn't know what to do. She doesn't know about labor and delivery. She doesn't have support.

She doesn't have a doula. She has to go through all this on her own -- the pain, the crying in the middle of the night, learning as you go. Then on top of that having classwork you barely understand. You're trying to do it all but you have no clue how to do any of this. Nobody warned you, nobody's coaching you along the way. It is the same as a student at school that's ignored in the back of the class. Nobody talks to them, nobody walks by to check if they're on task. They just fail.

When they have the support, that student is successful. He participates. He raises his hand. He gets the right answers. There may be some slacking off, but there's someone to pick them back up and keep them on track. Then you see them at the end in that cap and gown. It's the equivalent to seeing a mom with a healthy child. Or, for me, to see my son in that cap and gown.

When I came to Family Focus I was a person saying, ‘Tell me what I need to know’. Look back at where I was, and look where I am now. That's how I know the future that I want is attainable. Because of Family Focus, I learned to lead. Now, I provide. I educate. I am an asset to the community. **I'm Family Focus.”**



Shantel with her children Kenneth and Savannah and Family Focus Founder Bernice Weissbourd