

PROVIDER SPOTLIGHT

CELEBRATING OUR ECE COMMUNITY



Top row, left to right: Shakira Waples, Carmen Wright & Rose Currington, Jessica Arce & Kelly Gomez-Manzano, Terri McGriff and Ugochi Akinmoladun. Bottom row, left to right: Bonnie Aube, Thomisha Street, Donna Nichols, Laura Morris, Carrette Monsanto and Jaquaya Thomas.

Written by Stephanie Thompson/ Photos by Courtney Foster, DIEEC

September 2026

DIEEC recently launched a new project focused on helping early childhood professionals to feel seen, valued, represented, and connected. Our journey began at our August block party, where our guests had an opportunity to share their stories with us.

Hearing ECE professionals speak openly about their experiences reminded us that there is power in connection- when we see our own purpose, struggles, and joy reflected in others, it reinforces that none of us are doing this work alone. We are genuinely excited to share these voices and continue building a platform where every educator feels seen and valued. Thank you to everyone who stepped up to the microphone at the block party to speak from the heart!

The excerpts highlighted below represent just a brief sampling of the lived experiences shared at the block party. DIEEC will continue sharing more of these stories in the coming months, and this is only the beginning- there will be plenty of future opportunities for voices in our community to be heard.

Passion & Purpose Over a Paycheck

- **Ugochi Akinmoladun & Carrette Monsanto** emphasized that deep passion and patience are essential for navigating the daily demands of early childhood education.
- **Jessica Arce** noted that working with children is about investing 100% of yourself into building the future rather than just earning a paycheck.

“

“I’m just giving it all, and it fills my heart to know that children and family understand that. That’s the way that I show love, and having children that are willing to come back to my program when they don’t need to be there, and when they outgrow it, and when they hug me, it means that I’m doing something right.” – **Jessica Arce**



Advocacy & Inclusion

- **Jaquaya Thomas** shared her dedication to being a voice for the voiceless and ensuring children with disabilities experience total belonging.
- **Bonnie Aube** illustrated how trusting her instincts to identify a child’s medical issue expanded into legislative advocacy for diabetic children in childcare.

“

“I became an aunt at seven, and my nephew, at the age of two, he was diagnosed with autism...and so just working with him and making sure that he understood what affection meant, understood that he was loved, and making sure that he was a part of any social groups or connections, we as a family, we did that...I always gravitated towards children with special needs because I always wanted to treat them how I wanted my nephew to be treated.” – **Jaquaya Thomas**



Keep an eye out in October REACH for opportunities to share YOUR stories with us!

Deep Connections & Lasting Impact

- **Donna Nichols & Terri McGriff** highlighted the lifelong reward of becoming extended family and seeing former students thrive as young adults.
- **Kelly Gomez-Manzano** reflected on showing love through daily care and cooking, exemplified by former students returning years later just to say hello.
- **Laura Morris** shared how embedding mindfulness and emotional self-awareness helps educators understand that behavior is communication.

“

“I had to take time to get to know myself. I had to go back and kind of think about where things were coming from and the why, and then I could sift out what was mine and what was the child's. So take time to know yourself. Don't take it personally...they're not trying to drive you crazy. Behavior is communication, and it's all around relationships.”

– **Laura Morris**



Community, Growth & Mentorship

- **Shakira Waples** explained how sharing practical resources online creates a supportive network for providers and families.
- **Rose Currington & Carmen Wright** shared the power of peer mentorship in sustaining long-term careers.
- **Thomisha Street** grounded her work in the simple act of being a nurturer.

“

“I go to all the meetings...that Tina and Kim [DIEEC Family Child Care Network Coordinators] give...I'm there every meeting. We feed off each other, and other providers.” – **Carmen Wright**



Thanks so much to Ugochi, Terri, Bonnie, Thomisha, Jaquaya, Shakira, Carrette, Jessica, Kelly, Laura, Donna, Rose, and Carmen for kicking off this initiative with their honesty and wisdom!