

Renee Philpot (00:00):

Sometime between my sophomore and junior year in high school, my dad posed the question to me, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" And without hesitation, I said, "Well, I'm going to be a kindergarten teacher." And from that point on, I patterned my steps in a way in which I could become a kindergarten teacher. After graduating with my degree in early childhood education, I set out to find that dream job. I quickly found out that kindergarten teachers were not in high demand, but lucky for me, library media specialists were. I had a small school district offer me a job as their first elementary library media specialist. I honestly had no idea what a library media specialist did, but it involved some kindergartners so I took the job. About 3 years into that job, I met and married my husband of 31 years now. A couple of years into our marriage, we decided to start working towards the dream of becoming parents. Eight years of hard labor later, that included several failed adoptions, we finally brought our first son, Zachary, home.

Renee Philpot (01:04):

I was overjoyed as a new mom and I didn't see some obvious things that were going on. I didn't realize that Zachary was not a typical developing child. I didn't realize that sleeping 23.5 hours a day was not normal. When Zach was one month old, the doctor ordered his first MRI. That MRI set us down a path to his diagnosis of nonketotic hyperglycinemia or NKH for short. I quickly learned that NKH is a genetic disorder that's very rare, and it comes with severe developmental delay, extreme sleepiness, seizures, a lot of medications, a lot of therapies and absolutely no cure. As you can imagine at that point in life, we were just making it from day to day. And during that time, a fellow early childhood educator sent word to me that we needed to contact Sunshine School and we needed to apply for Medicaid waiver services. I didn't have a clue what either of those meant, just like I didn't know what it meant to be a librarian, but I was just surviving. So I made those phone calls.

Renee Philpot (02:19):

When Zach was four months old and Hunter was four weeks old, Sunshine School entered our home for the first time and started a relationship that changed my trajectory of life. Sunshine School turned out to be a preschool for children with special needs and waiver services are services that families of Arkansans can apply for. Its whole purpose is to keep children with significant disabilities in their homes instead of having to go to institutionalized care. Benton County Sunshine School became my support system. They filled in all of the blanks that I couldn't find the answers to. They also helped me understand the Medicaid system. The acronyms themselves could drive a person batty. They have IFSP, IEP, ST, OT, SPEECH. And the latest one that I've learned is PSP.

Renee Philpot (03:12):

There's some special people there that we wouldn't be where we are without them. Miss Dot taught me that it was okay not to be okay. Miss Sandra, she taught me that even if Zach never talked, he would communicate. And Miss Kendra. Well, Miss Kendra made me understand that I had to be Zach's advocate because he couldn't speak for himself. Sunshine School was a blessing and we applied for those waiver services while we were there with their help, because that in itself is not an easy task. As Zach's fifth birthday loomed, we had to start the process of transitioning from preschool, from early childhood into public school. We had all the meetings. Sunshine School staff met with the school staff. He was going to go to kindergarten at a classroom right outside my door. So I thought everything was good. His IEP was in place. We had determined the list of needs, the list of resources and all the things that need to be in place for Zach to be successful when he got to kindergarten.

Renee Philpot (04:14):

Unfortunately that wasn't the case. I very quickly figured out after Zach started kindergarten, that the priorities in early childhood and the priorities in public school couldn't be further apart. In preschool, all of the priorities were about individual needs, about what Zach needed, about what we needed and what was appropriate for him, where he was developmentally. When he went to public school, they expected Zach to fit into their mold. So it was about him fitting into their mold instead of the staff fitting into what he needed. And it was heartbreaking. Promises were not kept. Resources were not there. Equipment they promised was not there.

Renee Philpot (04:56):

Well, after 20 years in the public school system, 2 of those years having a child was of special needs who needed special education, I just didn't feel like I was making a difference anymore. I was frustrated and it just wasn't where I was supposed to be. So after 20 years in public education, I left public school and I started a career in early childhood special education. And I did it for one reason. I didn't want any other family to have to go through what Zach, my husband, and I had to go through when Zach transitioned to public school. I got to be the person who sat with families and helped them understand their child's diagnoses or where their child was delayed. I got to sit with them and tell them it was going to be okay, that we were going to meet the needs their child had and we were going to meet their family's needs. I got to sit down and make a difference in their lives just the way Sunshine School had made a difference in my life.

Renee Philpot (05:57):

Recently, I was asked, "Why do you continue 14 years later to do what you do? It's not an easy job." And the answer is just simple. I love the [inaudible 00:06:09] and I love the difference that I can make in the lives of children and families. Parents rely on me to help them be prepared and help them regardless of their child's ability, be prepared for the next stage in life. I'm privileged to be able to help lay the foundation on which they are going to build their child's life on, and that child is going to build their life on when they leave us. I never did become that kindergarten teacher that I told my dad I was going to be, but I got to be something more. I am an early childhood special educator. Every child deserves the experience that my Zach got at Sunshine School. Every child deserves that one-on-one, personalized attention. And I know without a doubt, that Zach learned more in his 5 years at Sunshine School in preschool than he did the entire 12 years he spent in public school.