



For Immediate Release
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Press Release

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SMARTSTART PRESENTS JOYCE M. ROBINSON WITH FIRST-EVER JOREAN DEBNAM CHAMPION FOR CHILDREN AWARD

RALEIGH— Wake County SmartStart marks its 10-Year Anniversary with an award to honor a local child care advocate. Joyce M. Robinson, director of Happy Face Preschool, will be presented with the first Jorean Debnam Champion for Children Award at *Wake Cares 4 Kids*, a Wake County SmartStart 10-Year Anniversary dinner, Thursday, September 21, at Embassy Suites in Cary. The event, scheduled from 6:30 to 9 pm, will attract approximately 250 child care providers to celebrate accomplishments and focus on future challenges and goals for ensuring accessible and affordable high quality child care in Wake County.

Ms. Robinson has been advocating for children and providing quality care in our community for over 20 years. Parents and peers applaud her for always going above and beyond the call of duty by lending her expertise to the community and childhood profession. Some describe her joy for educating and molding young minds as “contagious” and many have looked to her for assistance in seeking accreditation because of her open, verbalized commitment to quality. Robinson’s center, Happy Face Preschool, was one of the very first in North Carolina to receive the five-star rating accreditation.

Robinson founded Happy Face Preschool after 18 years of dedicated service to West Raleigh Presbyterian Children Center, where she worked for 11 years as director. Early on in Robinson’s career (just two years after working as an assistant teacher), she set her sights on becoming the director of a childcare center, and she reached this accomplishment in just seven years. This type of determination and drive is what Robinson brings to everything she does whether it is at her own center or in the community.

In her quest for the best for our children, Robinson has a keen sense of understanding that it takes the best educators, the best programs and a constant focus on quality to help our children develop and grow. Therefore, she continues to assist in the development of others by conducting community workshops and empowering her own staff through professional training opportunities. Additionally, she continues to grow and develop herself through continued education. In addition to her bachelor’s degree in elementary education from Shaw University, Robinson also has a master’s in education administration from North Carolina State University and is working toward her doctoral degree.

Over the years, Robinson has served on various boards and working committees related to child care, youth resources and education. She currently serves as a validator for the Academy of Early Childhood Programs in Washington and is a Child Care Credential Instructor. She is a previous board member and current member of National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

Robinson has received numerous awards, including the State of North Carolina Distinguished Women Award, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Woman of the Year, Golden Circle Award Woman of the Year of St. Matthew AME Church, the YWCA’s Director Award, Shaw University Meritorious Award.

The Jorean Debnam Champion for Children award, sponsored by Discount School Supply, is named after the late Jorean Debnam, a leader in Wake County's child care community whose tireless efforts as co-founder and director of New Bern Avenue Day Care Center made a difference in thousands of people's lives from 1968 to 2003.

Wake County SmartStart Press Release – Page 2

“Establishing the Champion for Children Award in Jorean’s honor, not only commemorates her work to improve the lives of thousands of children and their families, but also recognizes the meaningful work of others in this vital industry,” said Pam Dowdy, executive director of Wake County SmartStart. “The award will honor a local leader who inspires enthusiasm and support for high-quality child care while mobilizing parents, colleagues and the community-at-large around issues affecting young children and their families.”

Debnam's vision for a child care center began in the early 1960s. It was through her work helping women on welfare obtain job training at Wake Opportunities that Debnam saw how inconsistent, informal child care affected a mother's ability to work and provide for her family. With grants from United Way of Wake County, Catholic Diocese, Christ Episcopal Church, she opened the New Bern Avenue Day Care to serve 117 children. As one of the first centers in the state to be certified by the NC Division of Social Services, half of the children enrolled in the center received child care subsidies from the county. Over the decades, Debnam worked tirelessly to solicit community donations from fraternities, sororities, churches and citizens to provide scholarships to many families who needed tuition assistance.

Despite having to balance caring for her four children and responsibilities of the center, Debnam earned a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education from Shaw University. Debnam also supported education in the early childhood field as New Bern Avenue Day Care was the first field observation site for students at Shaw University and later a site for North Carolina State University and Peace College. She lost her fight with cancer and died October 24, 2003 at the age of 64.

Debnam’s daughter, Alyssa Strayhorn, will help present the award to Robinson at the Wake Cares for Kids event Thursday, September 21 at Embassy Suites in Cary.

As a local partner of the North Carolina Partnership for Children, **Wake County SmartStart** works with national, state and local agencies, as well as other nonprofits that serve Wake County children, ages birth to 5, and their families through vital programs. Wake County SmartStart works to improve the quality, accessibility and affordability of child care settings, provide preventive health services and support families in a variety of ways. The organization also promotes, supports, and advocates for the needs of young children living in Wake County. To obtain more information on Wake County SmartStart’s allocation of state funds and its activities with local partner agencies, visit www.wakesmartstart.org.

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