

Two Surprised As 2023 Arkansas Outstanding Early Childhood Professionals Of The Year

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(LITTLE ROCK, Ark.) — The owner and operator of a preschool in Ash Flat and the education coordinator at a Head Start program in Little Rock have been named the 2023 Arkansas Outstanding Early Childhood Professionals of the Year, the Arkansas Department of Human Services (DHS) announced today.

Shalynn Lane of Mrs. Sha's Preschool and Shenitta Shephard of UAMS Head Start were named as the co-winners of the annual award. Both winners were surprised in person with news that they had won.

The DHS Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education (DCCECE) has selected a winner for this honor each year since 1988 as a way to recognize individuals who make a significant contribution to the early care and education field in Arkansas. The winner is announced each year around Arkansas Children's Week (ACW), a celebration of children of all ages and their educators and families. This year, ACW ran from April 15-21.

"There are so many devoted educators across this state working to ensure that young children are ready for a lifetime of learning," said Tonya Williams, DCCECE Director. "It's never easy to pick one, and this year we simply couldn't limit it to a single winner. I'm honored to recognize both Shalynn and Shenitta, who have each gone above and beyond to make lasting impacts on countless children. They each deserve this honor, and I thank them for their dedication to the critical work of early childhood education."

Lane has operated a family child care home for more than 20 years while also staying active in her community. She has partnered with a local group to host swimming lessons and life jacket safety events for children; helped facilitate "stuff the squad car" events at a Wal-Mart to stock a local pregnancy help center; and participated in a "Shop with a Cop" Christmas drive for children in need.

Lane wrote in her nomination that she has touched hundreds of families through her child care home, adding that local elementary school administrators routinely compliment her and staff "on the maturity and well-behaved children I send them for kindergarten."

“My job is about raising children in a developmentally appropriate manner,” Lane wrote. “Too many people fail to realize how important the first five years of life are for children. What we do in the first five years can make or break that child as an adult. What happens in childhood will definitely carry over to adulthood.”

Shephard, meanwhile, joined UAMS Head Start after seeing first-hand the positive impact that Head Start had on her own children. She volunteered in the program at first, and that, she said, made her “want to be a part of something greater.”

Shephard works with children from infancy to 5 years of age, and she said she especially enjoys running into previous students and families and finding that they remember their time in the program and the lessons that she taught them.

“My vision is for our children to continue to receive a head start in their education and social skills,” Shephard wrote. “With the education that they receive, they will become successful students. My prayer is that they develop the life skills that they need to be the best human they can be.”

Lane and Shephard will have the opportunity to serve as early childhood ambassadors on DCCECE committees, and they may also be featured as early childhood education spokeswomen in the media and on DHS and DCCECE social media channels.

More information on the importance of quality child care is available on the Better Beginnings website at arbetterbeginnings.com. Additional details about Arkansas Children’s Week are available at arkansaschildrensweek.com.