

And the Little Children Shall Lead Them



OU-Tulsa

The recruitment of Diane Horm, shown here on her arrival at OU-Tulsa in 2006, jump-started the move to a degree in early childhood education, as well as applied research, evaluation and outreach into the Tulsa community.

Oklahoma instituted mandatory kindergarten in 1989-90. Two generations later, the state is leading the nation in early childhood education. "Oklahoma acknowledges that education begins in infancy," says OU-Tulsa's Diane Horm—and she ought to know.

BY CONNIE CRONLEY

So, what our mothers told us was right:

- Go outside and play.
- Eat your vegetables.
- Play well with others.
- Read, or be read to, every day!

These and similar tenants are the building blocks of healthy early childhood development. What we experience before kindergarten sets the path for life-long success. If it is as simple as ABC, why does not every family do it? That is the big question. The answer is, it is not simple for every family. Why not—and what to do about it—is the heart of OU-Tulsa's Early Childhood Education Program (bachelor's degree) and Early Childhood Education Institute (applied research, evaluation and outreach). *continued*



Photo provided

OU-Tulsa's Diane Horm, in the blue shirt, can't seem to get enough of her program's clients—children involved in early childhood education, ages birth to eight, and the teachers and parents who work with them.

Diane Horm is central to both programs. Colleagues say that she is the rock star of early childhood education in Oklahoma.

Early childhood education is an innovative and growing field of study that focuses on children from birth through age eight. What is unique about the OU-Tulsa program is that it places special emphasis on infants and toddlers, the most understudied age group.

The biggest revelation in the field, Horm says, is the discovery that infants have the capacity to learn. "They can perceive, organize and understand their world. This has led to an explosion of interest in early childhood development."

In Oklahoma, heightened interest led the George Kaiser Family Foundation of Tulsa to invest significant funding in Educare (Tulsa's state-of-the-art childhood centers) and in OU's partner program at Tulsa Community College. That investment then led to hiring Horm, who with colleague Libby Ethridge, has built OU-Tulsa's early childhood educa-

tion teacher certification program.

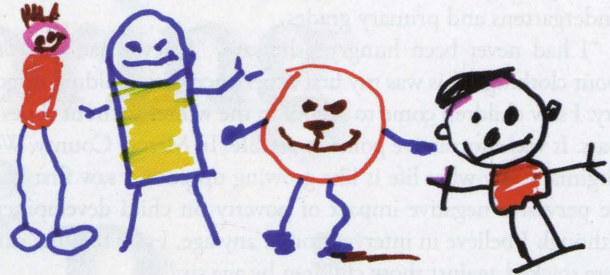
The OU-Tulsa program is a complex of elements: teacher certification, bachelor's degree, research, outreach (with community partners such as Head Start/Early Head Start and public schools, parents and policy makers) and—no small detail—the opportunity to graduate from OU debt-free while providing early childhood classrooms with highly qualified teachers. "We are developing a workforce that will shape the future of early care and education," Horm says.

This combination of programs, in addition to the state-funded pre-kindergarten classes for four-year-olds, has paid off. Oklahoma is recognized as a national leader in early childhood education.

Early childhood lays a path for later development and success in educational, social and emotional development. In short—everything in life. Ultimately, everybody benefits. The solution—spend money, and lots of it, early.

Nobel Prize-winning University of Chicago economist James Heckman is a premier voice in the importance of investing in early and equal development. He believes that children in poor and underprivileged families need help getting a solid start in life, and he believes that this premise is at the headwaters of the solution to some of the biggest problems in America.

How did Oklahoma philanthropist George Kaiser come to the same conclusion? "I set out to identify my charitable priorities using an analytical, rather than intuitive approach," he says. "I quickly determined that providing disadvantaged young children—who bore no responsibility for the circumstances of their birth—with equal opportunity was the purest philanthropic pursuit. Moreover,



"You can't open the top of their heads and pour in information. Education doesn't work like that."

I was burdened by the guilt of realization that whatever good fortune I had was not of my doing."

One of the lessons of stem cell research, Kaiser says, "is that cognitive and social/emotional abilities are more a function of early childhood experience than genetics."

In Another Part of the Forest . . .

Earlier in her career, Horm was a school psychologist who came to the same realization by personal experience. She grew up in a comfortable, blue-collar family in western Pennsylvania and began her trek through higher education studying nursing at a community college. "I soon learned," she says, "that I was not well prepared for the social/emotional impact of sickness and death."

Photo provided



However, she liked the study of science connected with nursing, so she switched her major to psychology and

In October 2010 Diane Horm, left, and colleague Traci Ballard collaborated on a community outreach effort, the fourth annual Early Childhood Leadership Institute with the descriptive theme, "Take Those Kids Outside and . . ." Ballard is an OU law graduate currently the director of OU-Tulsa's Professional Development and Leadership Academy.

then to childhood education and development. A fistful of graduate degrees later—"I really like school," Horm says—she was working in a poor coal mining area as a school psychologist for kindergartens and primary grades.

"I had never been hungry," she says. "I never had to worry about clothing. This was my first experience with children in poverty. I saw children come to school in the winter without shoes or coats. It was a formative point in my life. In Mercer County, West Virginia, I saw what life is like growing up poor. I saw first hand the pervasive negative impact of poverty on child development. Although I believe in intervention at any age, I saw that the cards were stacked against those children by age six."

The experience ignited the activist in her. She went back to school to get a Ph.D. in early childhood development. "Since then, I have focused on young children growing up in poverty and programs and services that intervene to facilitate their development."

That involves comprehensive elements of health, medical care, education and language—especially language. It involves early oral language development—singing, talking, reading and storytelling. Don't even mention flash cards to Horm. "You can't open the top of their heads and pour in information. Education doesn't work like that. We have to provide rich learning opportunities and guide children in building their own knowledge through experience," she says.

It involves developing security with healthy attachments. For teachers, this means learning how to set up a classroom of small groups with consistent adult figures to foster trust and security.

It also means not micromanaging children's time and play. Give them blocks of time for dramatic play, Horm says. "Even something as simple as playing house lets the children organize their time, set goals and establish roles: 'You be the daddy. I'll be the mommy. We'll cook pancakes for dinner and then . . .'" This type of play has been found to build executive functioning, teaching young children to focus attention and establish goals. "It sets them on the road for school readiness and educational success," she says.

"Infants, toddlers and young children are scientists," says Carla Goble, coordinator of the Early Childhood Education Program at Tulsa Community College West Campus. In 2001, she wrote a grant application to the George Kaiser Family Foundation to provide scholarships to students majoring in early childhood. "The idea," she says, "was to prepare more highly educated teachers for young children in the Tulsa area. They would improve the quality of programs and thus enhance children's development."

In 2005, Goble developed an articulation agreement for students to transfer their TCC early childhood-education college credits to OU. The following year, Horm was hired. But that was not as easy as it sounds.

Quick Facts:

Diane Horm is the George Kaiser Family Foundation Endowed Chair in Early Childhood Education and director of the OU-Tulsa Early Childhood Institute. She is the 2011 recipient of The University of Oklahoma Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education Leadership/Citizenship Award.

OU-Tulsa Early Childhood Education Program is a degree completion program in education with emphasis on early childhood.

OU-Tulsa Early Childhood Education Institute brings students, educators, researchers and doctors together to collaborate in the growing field of early childhood education.

OU's College of Education is ranked in the top ten percent of graduate colleges of education by *U.S. News and World Report*.

"You're inviting me WHERE?"

By then, Horm was a tenured professor at the University of Rhode Island. It was "a full, happy career" with university teaching, service as director of the campus child development laboratory—and plenty of sailing. "I wasn't on the job market," she says. "I was building a two-car garage on my house."

The job recruiters called her several times before they got her attention. "Oklahoma?" she asked. "Is that west of the Mississippi?"

Oklahoma—and OU—turned out to be too promising to pass up. She liked the proposed collaboration with TCC. "I have a soft spot in my heart for community colleges," she says. "That's what gave me my start. It changed my life."

She liked the "dynamic environment" she found at OU-Tulsa. She liked the research opportunities. She liked the outreach element with parents, professionals and the community. She was fascinated by the "evolving experiment" of the program.

Horm never stepped foot in her new two-car garage in Rhode Island. She moved to Tulsa, sold her old 1977 sailboat and bought an old 1978 sports car instead.

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