Recognizing Excellence
Open Door Celebrates AAEYC Awards

On Tuesday February 21st, the Austin Association for the Education of Young Children (AAEYC) held its annual awards banquet that included awards for two Open Door teachers. Chantal Mbaya, our East School infant teacher, was awarded the Sally Beth Moore Award as Classroom Teacher of the Year. Brandy Griffin, pre-K teacher at East, received the Madeline Sutherland Award for Outstanding Contributions to Young Children and Families with Special Needs.

Over ten years ago, one of our board members recommended Chantal to Open Door Director Melinda Harris. She knew Chantal as a resilient, hard-working refugee from the Congo who was an amazing mother to her 5 children. Chantal said, “I was afraid to start working professionally with children because I could barely speak English. But Melinda Harris, the director who hired me, trusted me and said she didn’t care if I spoke French, Swahili, or English … she knew that I communicated love to my infants regardless of how or what I spoke.” She was immediately recognized as our “baby whisperer” who can transform a room filled with crying children and anxious adults with her sense of calm. She is the quintessential multi-tasker: organized, knowledgeable, intuitive, and joyful.

“Chantal’s coming to this country, as a refugee and immigrant, has enriched the lives of those she touches and the wider community that she continues to help shape.” ~Larry Elsner
Executive Director Larry Elsner said, “I am inspired by Chantal every day. I love to see her work, to make really hard work look so easy. Everyone—children, parents, colleagues—learn from her. Most of us are in awe of her. Many of us—myself included—would have come out (of her war-torn homeland) disillusioned, bitter, angry, depressed, and resentful had we walked in her shoes. But somehow she has transcended so much of her past to be the model teacher that she is today.”

Miss Brandy has been part of our Open Door family for 15 years. Larry notes, “In my fifteen years of working with Brandy, I have never heard her raise her voice. She works magic in the classroom and makes inclusion work.” She listens to children, respects them, takes her cues from them, and encourage them to explore. She explained, “You set boundaries that don’t feel like boundaries.” Brandy shared, “I have faced several challenges on my way here, but each one of them has only strengthened me to make me the person I am today; a thorough professional who knows exactly what she wants; someone who sets her eyes on a goal and does not lose sight of it, unless it is achieved.”

Special thanks to East School Director Sheila Matthews for nominating these outstanding women - Open Door celebrates these teachers who exemplify these qualities we hope to nurture in our children as part of the Open Door Way!

For more information about Austin Association for the Education of Young Children: http://www.aaeyc.org/awards.html

Winning this award would not have been possible without the inspiration I have received from my family, friends, and my Open Door family for whom I have the deepest respect, and from whom I have derived the strength to challenge myself.” ~Brandy Griffin

The Austin Association for the Education of Young Children