



## Initiatives in Action: School Readiness Initiative



## Redesigning the American Dream

My name is Heather.

My husband and I were living the American dream. We lived comfortably on respectable salaries, owned our own home and had two healthy children.

Life threw us the unexpected in 2005 when our third child, Brooklyn, was born with Smith-Magenis syndrome, a rare genetic disorder.

The developmental, physical and behavioral disorder is incredibly expensive to treat. She was diagnosed at two weeks of age and, at first, was in and out of the hospital every few days. She had more surgeries than I can remember. As parents, we seemed to have been handed an impossible hurdle. The worrying was consuming; I just wanted her to be healthy.

Today, Brooklyn is 3 years old and she's thriving. In addition, my other two children are also flourishing. If it weren't for United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) of Colorado's Creative Options Center for Early Education supported by Mile High United Way, we wouldn't be where we are today.

Before Brooklyn was born and before we found UCP, my kids were being looked after by family members while my husband and I worked. Even though I was grateful for the support, I wanted something beyond babysitting. I didn't even realize how important quality pre-school was until UCP.

My son Jamel, age 6 attended the Creative Options Center before he entered kindergarten this year and my daughter Whitney, age 4, attends with Brooklyn. The center gave my son and gives my daughters goals and objectives. It's not just free play all the time, its teaching them skills that will prepare them to succeed in school.

The big changes I've noticed in Jamel and Whitney since they've been at Creative Options are their social skills. Jamel is big for his age, and it was easy for him to feel out of place. But, he's coming out of his shell and kindergarten has been a very positive experience for him. Whitney is thriving because of all the positive praise they adhere to. She's not only learning good manners, but the center is giving her a place to show her development in relationship to other kids. Both of my children have learned how to be incredibly respectful, it's so important. Things are crazy at home, so I know they are learning valuable skills that they will take with them to school.

Brooklyn has developed tremendously in her time at UCP's Creative Options Center. Even though she's 3 years old, she has the development level of an 18 month old. In February 2008, she was communicating by hitting and



Brooklyn attends United Cerebral Palsy of Colorado's Creative Options Center for Early Education which receives funding from Mile High United Way' School Readiness Initiative.

## Redesigning the American Dream - cont.

scratching; Smith-Magenis is very similar to autism. She has horrible tantrums and doesn't sleep much at all. But despite the obstacles she has been able to learn and develop her social skills.

When we first enrolled her in she brought a basket of her favorite things to make her feel comfortable. Now, she doesn't need it. She plays with blocks, puzzles, and even plays dress up with the other kids – I never thought I'd see Brooklyn play dress up. She barely cries when I drop her off in the morning; this is a place she wants to be, she loves school.

We didn't know if we could enroll Brooklyn in child-care. UCP was not familiar with the syndrome, so we had a training session for any of the employees who were interested in learning. I thought a few staff members would show up, but over 20 came. We were overwhelmed by their support. The staff care so much and they made Brooklyn's transition work. I honestly didn't know if anyone but family could have the patience to handle Brooklyn, but they were completely willing to take the time to learn and help. Our family was incredibly moved.

Brooklyn's constant health problems threw our family into a tailspin, both financially and emotionally.

My husband and I met in college. We had a self sufficient life before Brooklyn. Having a special needs child is incredibly demanding. With all the therapies and doctor's appointments, there was no way for us both to work. One of us needed to quit our job and stay home.

We were grateful to have inherited my grandmother's home. But, as medical bills started to accumulate, we had to sell it in order to make ends meet. It broke my heart, but with only one income, we had to do it.



Whitney and mom share a book and a song.

Not only has United Cerebral Palsy of Colorado been an integral part of my children's lives, but also of mine. Enrolling all my children at the Creative Options Center enabled me to have the time to go back to school to get my nursing degree.

Today, we're still living the American dream; it's just a little bit redesigned. Thank you, Mile High United Way and United Cerebral Palsy of Colorado!

Even though times are tough I have a happy, healthy family. Brooklyn has been an amazing gift in all of our lives. She has taught us patience. We stop to smell the roses now and truly appreciate what we have.

For more information about Mile High United Way and our School Readiness Initiative, please visit our website at [www.unitedwaydenver.org](http://www.unitedwaydenver.org).

We can do more together.



Mile High United Way