

**Keynote Speech at the Joseph A. Forgione Development School for Youth
Orientation
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Greetings to the new DSY students, their programs associates, parents and friends and supporters. It is wonderful to be with you and I than Pam Lewis for the opportunity to speak with you today. I want to begin by asking you a few questions.

How many of you were once babies?

How many of you learned to talk?

How many spoke English as your first language?

How many Spanish?

Korean?

Chinese?

Bengali?

Other?

How come we all didn't begin speaking the same language? One reason is that we speak what the people around us speak. We learn the language we hear. But as babies, we're anything but passive in this process. We play an active role in creating ourselves as speakers. And we do it—together with those around us—through play.

Each one of us played with sounds and words and sentences as an everyday part of what we were doing with our family in the house and on the street and playground. Each one

of us creatively imitated mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters and grandparents and people on television, and they became part of who we were becoming, as the unique person that each of us is. And each of us developed off of this playing with others, growing in many ways, including growing as a learner.

Why call it play? And why do babies and little children learn and grow through play? And why is it harder for people to learn and grow when we get older? And is there something to do about that? And what does all of this have to do with the DSY?

I ask these questions as a psychologist. Now, I'm not a shrink. I'm a developmental psychologist, which means I'm interested in how people grow and develop all through life. I went to college and graduate school and got a Ph.D. — none of which was desired or expected of me by my mother, who had only an 8th grade education, or my father, who was a high school graduate. But it happened. I started out researching how babies learn to talk (no surprise) and when I discovered that they do it by playing, I realized how incredibly important play is for learning and growing well past babyhood. I decided to spend my life doing something about all the things that stand in the way of growth and learning and good education and a positive life for so many people, not just here in NYC but the world over.

I am convinced that people —at any age — learn and develop by relating with and creating with and performing with other people who are at different levels of skill, knowledge, age, ability and personality. I train teachers and psychologists and social

workers and anybody else who wants to learn a performance-based approach to learning and development, and I seek out others here in the city and around the world who are building innovative development projects. I study youth program, including the DSY and other All Stars programs, and share their growth and your growth with colleagues.

One of the things I love about the DSY—and maybe you will too—is that it's not like school. In school, there is very little diversity. You're with people the same age as you, mostly from the same neighborhood as you, in the same physical space all day. And then you're split into smaller groups based on how you score on tests. And what you're supposed to learn is cut up into little pieces—the school subjects—all separate from each other. And what about play? Well, play is left at the door. In my book, that's a no-growth model.

The DSY brings play back into the picture by giving you the chance to create a professional performance and learn to do that with professionals. It brings diversity back into the picture, because you all come together from different neighborhoods all over the city, you visit places you've never been to, and you interact with people who also come from different places, and have different skill sets, attitudes, experiences and personalities.

Now this may surprise you, but in some interesting way the workplace is a lot like home and nothing like school. For one thing, before we go to school, we learn as part of living our lives with others. We learn developmentally—not to pass a test but for life. We learn

to talk, to dress, to play with toys, to feed the cat, to solve problems—because our lives aren't divided into times for living in the world and times for learning about the world. The workplace is a lot like that—there's no special time to learn. Working life puts learning and living back together.

As you enter the DSY to learn about being a professional in the workplace, you have the chance to grow and learn the way babies do. You're beginning the program knowing very little about how to be a professional, but you'll be surrounded by people who do. They'll encourage you to be active and participate in creating your learning. To succeed, you'll have to creatively imitate your program associates and other adults and each other, and try out doing entirely new things and doing old things in new ways. To succeed, you'll have to play, to create new performances of yourselves, incorporating new skills and new relationships to become more of who you are. Unlike in school, you won't be judged by what you already know, or be told to sit quietly and do it by yourself.

I'll share one more observation about babies that I invite you to think about. One-year olds don't know how to talk and they learn to talk because they're encouraged to do what they don't know how to do. They're lucky because they don't even know they don't know. They're not knowers. They're encouraged to perform as speakers, to play with us, to play with sounds and words and to create little conversations. All of us, though, become knowers as we get older. And unlike babies, we know a lot of things about a lot of things. We know that knowing is valued, we know that there are things you're

supposed to know by a certain age or grade, and we know that not knowing them has certain consequences.

This knowing posture, which we all grow into, can put the brakes on our growing and learning. It makes it harder for you and for me to do things we don't know how to do, especially if everyone and everything around us expects us to know. The DSY doesn't expect that. It expects you to play and to be performers, to creatively imitate others, to try on new ways to be and try out new things to do, to create yourselves as learners and developing young adults. To be a grower, but not a knower.

It can be uncomfortable not to know. It can be scary. And it can also be very freeing and a lot of fun. Earlier I said that I study programs like the All Stars and other youth development programs to understand better how young people grow and develop so I and we can share that with the world. The most important part of this research is what the participants do and what they say about their experiences. So to end my remarks tonight I want to share with you a few comments from All Stars alumni.

One young man, 18 years old, said: "I learned the distinction between confidence and arrogance. I was shy, but I was sort of arrogant. I learned from doing this, from meeting a lot of the people we met, that I didn't know as much as I thought. Somehow, I don't know how, that made me less arrogant, but more confident."

And a 19 year-old woman had this to say: “Before, I wouldn’t really go out of my comfort zone. Now I’m finding myself doing that a lot. When I start getting too comfortable I try to challenge myself.”

So, when things get hard, when you feel stuck, or scared, or withdrawn, or too comfortable, it’s probably time to challenge yourselves and to perform confident. I’m certainly going to try to follow the wisdom of these young people.

In closing, my best wishes to all for a great 14-week performance!

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