

# **Carmen Reeves – Welcome Baby**

## **Bilingual Parent Educator, Car Seat Safety Tech**

Carmen Reeves is no stranger to social work and helping others. She has worked at Welcome Baby, a nonprofit in Durham, North Carolina, for 12 years and has had the unique opportunity to watch the organization flourish. You won't ever catch Reeves without a smile on her face and without a positive attitude; she is one of the many reasons why Welcome Baby is the successful organization it is today.



Reeves lived in Seattle for 24 years before moving to North Carolina. She worked for Together!, an organization that provides after-

school and summer programming for at-risk families in Washington state. The organization created "Neighborhood Centers" in five apartment complexes where children were most at risk for drug, alcohol, tobacco or violence exposure and ran programming in an apartment in each of the complexes. Reeves would run programming for up to 20 children at a time for as long as six hours a day during the summer.

Reeves' ability to speak Spanish has been a huge asset for her and for Welcome Baby. She lived in Panama for four years when her father was stationed in the army, which is when she first started speaking the language. She also took Spanish throughout high school.

When she moved to North Carolina in 2007, she knew she would get hired right away because she was bilingual. Within a month, she was hired in Alamance County. Two months later, the position she originally applied for at Welcome Baby reopened. She started out as a caretaker at Welcome Baby in August 2007. Today, she is one of the parent educators, teaching two classes a week, and is a car seat safety specialist.

"I love it. I love this job. I love the families, I love working with the families. And what I really love is that [Welcome Baby] is not stagnant – it's fluid," said Reeves.

Welcome Baby has expanded its programming dramatically since Reeves started. Reeves remembers a time when there were only single-topic classes. Today, Welcome Baby offers five courses each week, each lasting for 10-14 weeks. Classes range from literacy programs for parents to parenting technique classes. Reeves currently teaches The Incredible Years on Tuesday nights, a program that focuses on child development and parenting techniques, and Spanish Motherread, a reading literacy course for Spanish-speaking mothers.

Longer and more frequent programming has made it easier for Welcome Baby to establish relationships with the families it works with. It has also made it easier for families to establish relationships among themselves.

“It’s hard to build a relationship when you’re only having one class a month or maybe one class for eight weeks,” said Reeves.

“Especially for the Incredible Years, because that’s a 14-week series, you see those relationships forming during class because they have a common ground. You know, there’s something about hearing, ‘my kid fell out at Walmart the other day and threw a tantrum for 10 minutes and people were looking at me and judging me,’ and everyone is like, ‘oh yeah, that happens to me.’ That commonality, it really does bind them.”

Welcome Baby cares about every aspect of a child’s life, and Patience Mukelabai, program coordinator for Welcome Baby, is always looking to expand. In the near future, Mukelabai is hoping to have an on-site social worker as a food nutrition resource to address childhood obesity.

“[Welcome Baby] doesn’t have tunnel vision. It’s very forward focused,” said Reeves.

Reeves said that the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study will most likely be the next thing Welcome Baby integrates into its curriculum, an initiative that she is very excited about. Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) conducted the study between 1995 and 1997. It found that persons who experience four or more adverse childhood experiences increase their risk of alcoholism, drug abuse, depression and suicide attempts as an adult anywhere from fourfold to twelvefold.

Welcome Baby supports many families each year and has a large reach in Durham County. Welcome Baby’s Giving Closet, a place where families can pick out clothing for their children as well as maternity items, has reached 2,177 Spanish-speaking families and 1,234 English-speaking families in this year alone. There is a continuing need in Durham County for these types of programs and services.

Despite the need in Durham County and beyond, Welcome Baby continues to be a unique organization and resource.

“We have people call all the time that have come to services here, and it’ll be like, ‘I’m moving to Wake County or I’m moving to Orange County or moving to Winston-Salem, is there a Welcome Baby?’ No, there’s not. I think we are a pretty unique agency; I don’t know if there is another agency that does all of the things we do,” said Reeves.

Some of Reeves’ favorite memories at Welcome Baby were the times when she got to see parents’ growth over the course of the classes she teaches, particularly in the Incredible Years classes.

“Every program has a different focal point, and I love them all,” she said.

“A lot of times they come to [Incredible Years] and expect that the problem is with their child. And so, through gentle facilitation through the course, they realize how they react to their child or how they treat their child or how they discipline their child is part of the problem, that the child is just reacting to how you’re treating them. So, when you see those light bulb moments you kind of go, ‘wow, okay. Yeah, this is worth it.’”