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GOOD START IN LIFE IS A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Marni Vliet is intrigued by what she calls life's pivotal moments, moments that alter the course of your life or redefine your existence. Vliet, president and chief executive of the Kansas Health Foundation, says the loss of someone close could inspire devotion to a cause or to their memory. Gentle encouragement or direction through a long friendship or chance meeting can lead to success. Intersections of fate and caring can make us who we are.

Increasingly, researchers are learning just how pivotal the first five years of life are for children, and how caring, encouragement and simply being there can immeasurably alter a child's life for the better.

You, too, can learn more about this critical period of childhood this week by attending the opening session of the Kansas Health Foundation's 2006 Leadership Conference.

The conference, "Early Childhood Development: Investing in the Future," will feature an impressive roster of speakers offering cutting-edge insights into the issues confronting children.

If all of this sounds like *deja vu*, it should.

The foundation sponsored a nearly identical conference last year that was limited to invited guests. This year, Vliet wanted everyone to be able to hear the event's opening speaker, former television talk show host Bertice Berry. Her presentation, at 9:15 Thursday morning, is free and open to the public.

The rest of the conference will be by invitation only.

I missed most of Berry's presentation last year, but I was there to see people emerge from her session buzzing about how she made them laugh, how she made them cry, and how she inspired them with her message that everyone has a responsibility to help give children a good start.

According to conference materials, Berry grew up poor in Delaware and was once told by a high school teacher that she wasn't "college material."

Fortunately, another teacher convinced Berry otherwise.

She now holds a doctorate and runs her own production company in Georgia.

I won't miss Berry this year, nor will I miss hearing Bruce Perry, a senior fellow with the Child Trauma Academy in Houston, again. I devoted a column to his presentation last June, but it was so fascinating, some of it bears repeating.

Perry said we exist in a society where families have gotten smaller, where people in those families spend much of their time at home watching television in separate rooms instead of interacting, and where the economy steals more and more of the time single mothers could spend with their children.

Perry said our physical health is linked to having people around to communicate with. With each moment of interaction, neurons in our brains stretch, touch and bond, forming a web of neurological tissue holding our memory.

Perry and Berry will each return to Wichita, along with other dynamic speakers, to share their powerful messages about the importance of molding and managing young lives.

So, as Vliet says, this conference will not only be interesting, but also could prove to be a pivotal moment for every child we know.

Reach Mark McCormick at 316-268-6549 or mmccormick@wichitaeagle.com.

If you go

What: The Bishop Kenneth W. Hicks Leadership Conference Lecture: Giving Kids a Good Start, by Bertice Berry, Ph.D.

When: 9:15 a.m., Thursday

Where: Hyatt Regency Wichita, Room 210