

Laurie Schwab Zabin Transcript

Chana Revell Kotzin: Tape number two. Laurie Schwab-Zabin. A moment ago, we were talking a little bit about your latest area of research, which was looking rather at the risk factors that promoted early pregnancies and other risky behavior in young women, was looking at what prevented the young women having these risky behaviors. Can you say more about that?

Laurie Schwab-Zabin: Well, I would like to put this, if I may, against a background of my thinking about the field of adolescent sexual behavior and pregnancy in the first place, which is that we really have two quite different problems of adolescent sexual behavior in this country and yet we lump it all together. One is the fact that over the last years, the age of first intercourse has become younger, but all over the country, all religious groups, all social groups, all economic groups, all geographic groups – it's just a phenomenon that has happened across the board. It results in much too much sexually transmitted disease and a high abortion rate compared to other developed countries, but it does not very often lead to childbearing at early ages, at early teen ages. On the other hand, we have another problem which is located more in our pockets of real disadvantage in this country, in which we have even earlier age of sexual onset. Obviously, also the same high rates of sexually transmitted disease and abortion but also a lot of childbearing, and I think if we look at these and understand that they are quite different phenomena and that the second one is based on an entire complex, not just on family planning and a need for family planning and sex education. Rather it's based on an entire complex of need of the young people that are involved. As the strictures of any given society against early sexual behavior become weaker, as they clearly have in this country, the rewards

have to be stronger to keep young people on course. Most of our middle-class kids know those rewards. It's sticking to the normative structure of schooling and job and training and marriage, and childbearing brings great rewards. On the other hand, we have allowed to develop in this country huge groups of young people that don't see those rewards in their lives at all. Everybody said for years that is in the field that hope is one of the best contraceptives. If you take away hope from young people and keep them in these pockets of poverty in which they see very little hope, very little achievement, very little good in the future, there really is very small reason for them to avoid behaviors which are hormonally normal at puberty but not exactly what we'd like to see every young person engaged in. So, against that background, I'd have to say we have to look at a whole range of aspects of a young person's life to understand what it is that makes it possible for a young person that is given very little reason for that level of hope but still manages to stay on course, to stay out of trajectory to achievement. We're looking for what those things are and how early can we find them and perhaps bolster them, perhaps help parents to provide these supportive kinds of influences on their young people's lives. Are they internal? Were they external? Our data allow us to look at all kinds of things from birth on, neurological development, verbal skills, school achievement – all of that. So, we'll be looking at all of that.

CRK: And are your results pending?

LSZ: Oh, they're very pending. Unfortunately, much as I should have been doing on this, I'd been completely led the other direction with all the work of the Gates Institute [Bill & Melinda Gates Institute for Population and Reproductive Health], and it's only in the

last few weeks, literally that I have been able to get back to that with a team of a couple of my students and colleagues that will be working with me on it.

CRK: And how many years has this [inaudible]?

LSZ: Oh, well, this particular research was a two-year grant. It's already up, and I've gotten an extension to be able to get back and do the work at this point now that the administrative load of the Gates Institute is a little bit less, but I still have doctoral students that I'm working with from many parts of the world. One Indian doctoral student, one Chinese, several Americans working in either the U.S. or other parts of the world, and still I personally am working in India, where I'll be going next month, and Peru and Guatemala, several countries.

CRK: Could you tell me a little bit more about what you're going off to India for?

LSZ: Well, we had contact a couple of years ago with a doctor in Kolkata who runs a wonderful agency called the Child in Need Institute, a huge institute that works all over West Bengal. He was very interested in working with us, so he came and spent the last year under the Gates support as a postdoctoral fellow and spent the year with us. He and I spent a lot of time together trying to decide what could be done that we could help

with in his part of the world. One of the things that he wants to do is to work with young adults and older adolescents. Of course, the rate of adolescent sexual behavior outside of marriage is way, way lower in a country like India than it is here, but already we see changes happening, and he's very anxious to understand those changes early on and also to create in his organization the ability to carry on a level of research which we can help him with. So, I'll be going there at the end of October/beginning of November to work on training his staff in some of the ideas that I imagine I've evolved over the last many years in the field. I was supposed to go in June, but as you know, there was the Pakistani Indian face-off, and up to the last day, I was ready to go, but when the state department said no, so did the dean, and that postponed the trip to now. In Peru and here again, we have a very interesting picture. There was great support for family planning in the last years, but a change of administration only a year and a half ago brought in an administration that, in turn, had been supported by the radical right.

President [Alejandro] Toledo put in charge of the health ministry the most radically conservative of his supporters. The result is that all family planning has now been wiped out of the ministry of health. Fortunately, in the meantime, when I had been there a year and a half ago – over a year and a half ago, two years ago, I think it was – we had already decided that it was necessary to have a platform outside of government to keep this family planning support going. So as of this last spring, we have established officially hand in hand with a university in Lima – Johns Hopkins and Cayetano Heredia University are the co-founders of a new center for reproductive health and development. I was this morning just on email with them; they came to visit us two weeks ago and are moving forward as an institute for research, for collaboration in training, for an organization that will try to take the best of what's been learned all over the country and translate it into better programs to serve in the jungle regions, in the Andean regions, and in the urban regions.

CRK: And these are both with the Gates Institute?

LSZ: These are all parts of the Gates work.

CRK: So, although you've stepped down, you're still [inaudible].

LSV: Oh, deeply involved in each of their projects, on their management committee, which will be meeting this afternoon to go over some of these activities. I'm still involved with their students. And a new thing that I'm trying to get started for them was something I wrote into the original grant but haven't had time to start yet, and it's what I'm calling a reciprocal learning center. I've had the feeling for many years that Americans seem to think they have everything to teach and nothing to learn, and it's high time that we begin to listen to some of these people that come to study with us, to work with us, people to who's counties we go that we need to learn from them as they are learning from us and we're not doing it. So, we need to find ways. Here we are situated in East Baltimore with many of the problems of a very poor country and were not asking these visitors, people like the man that I just described who spends his life working on the community level with poor families and were not asking his help for what we should be doing at home. We're not asking people whether the concepts we're teaching are really relevant to their cultures and their societies, so that's another direction I'm hoping to go in the years ahead.

CRK: I was struck actually in the previous tape when we were talking about your students, and you mentioned that several were from abroad, and obviously, your doctoral students were also from America. But I wonder what the percentage was. Do you have many?

LSZ: Well, it varies in the department; of course, a very many are international students, and now with the extra funding that the Gates Institute provides us, we can bring even more of the international students, and we're very happy to do that. I personally hadn't worked with as many as I am working with now, but I even found that last spring. I teach a course in the last quarter of the year on adolescent sexual behavior and pregnancy, and in the past, out of the twenty-one or two that I allow in the course, there have only been one or two international because its course has been highly focused in the United States. Last year almost half the class was from the developing world, and I had to switch it around very quickly. No, I think there is growing interest in this field. One of the things I'm hoping to do is to try to understand why all over the world, in countries of very different levels of economic development, countries with totally different cultures, you keep hearing concern about that adolescent period of life as being very threatening or very difficult or very challenging to the country. Very interesting.

CRK: Yes. How do you think the contributions that you have made to your field – I know that you are being very modest throughout our interview, but you certainly have made contributions. How do you think that has affected the movement and the research area?

LSZ: Oh, I think one of the few advantages that I had that perhaps have helped or I've been told have helped is the fact that I came from a service background into academia. Very often, academics raise questions that are of great interest to them and spend a lot of their time doing research on something that they want to know the answer to, but it isn't much use to the people that are out there in the trenches delivering the services. What I've tried to do is to bring together the world of medical and health services with the social science world and bring all of that together with the hands-on service world, with the world of political realities, with the world of service provision, and to try to find out what the questions are that are really troubling to the people that are out there trying to do the work. I've tried over the years, no matter how deeply involved in academia I am, to accept at least one invitation a year that I know will put me in a few days' contact with people at the service level just to keep my vision on the real world which I think is of great importance. I've tried to produce research that can actually help those service providers in doing what it is they do. A few years ago, in following groups of young people to find out whether there were indeed any negative effects of abortion in addition to finding out that there were no negative psychological or educational, or economic effects to abortion as there were to childbearing. I should qualify that and say not psychological effects of childbearing but certainly economic and educational, but we were able to show that there were no negative effects psychologically on any of the three groups we followed that were those with negative tests, those with positive tests carried to term, and those with positive tests who terminated the pregnancy. None of them experienced any bad psychological effects in the long term, but we were very surprised to find out that those with negative pregnancy tests were a very high-risk group, and fifty-eight percent of them were pregnant within eighteen months. So we've been able to tell that to the providers now and to say to them when young people come in for a pregnancy test, and it's negative, don't just tell them it's negative and let them go away in great relief. That's a

time to try to reach them with contraceptive education and the kind of education that may help them to postpone further sexual activity, cut down on the number of partners, and/or use contraception. Those are the kinds of things that emerge if you're asking questions that may have relevance to the service community, and I've tried to do that.

CRK: How do you think your work has been received by the wider community, in perhaps Baltimore and beyond?

LSZ: I certainly have received all the support and positive vibes that anyone could ask for. I think we all have a level of frustration that we can't do more. We were speaking a little bit earlier of the interface between the family planning movement, for example, the population movement, and the environment initiatives over the past years. You were also raising questions of the intersection with perhaps the feminist movement. These are all directions that one can go and can carry the movement in different directions.

Obviously, we can't do every bit of it in one lifetime, but it's been very interesting to me to have some contact with each of those fields, especially the environment one. I thought you might be interested in that. Back when I was on the board of the National Planned Parenthood in the '70s and headed up their international committee, I was sent as a representative of the National Planned Parenthood to the United Nations environment conference in Stockholm. The United Nations has had these environment conferences every so many years. After that, I did a lot of lecturing on the intersection of the two movements, and I think it was there that I learned so much about something you were asking about before, which was the politics of this movement. To watch the really almost disastrous head-on political collisions between many of the subgroups within the

environmental movement [and] within the population movement, it's all been very much of an education. I think what we have to do is sort of keep our vision on the real purpose, on the lives of women and children and families everywhere, and try to get away from some of those political headaches.

CRK: Well, I wondered if you wanted to add anything that we haven't covered in the course of this interview. Was there any area that you felt we could concentrate on a little bit more, or is there another subject that you would like to talk about? [Recording paused.] You wanted to add one additional point.

LSZ: Well, just, when you ask, is there anything else to say? It's not something we haven't spoken of, but it just seems to me that people have to realize how vigilant one has to be for years and years and years after you think that challenges have been met or battles won. I mentioned how none of us would have ever believed in the '70s that we'd be where we are today, but I think it is very distinctly possible that we are on the way to turning back in this country much of the progress that women have made, much of the progress that the health movements have made. We are a country that really has got to put together a way of bringing health insurance to everybody, that has to build everything that has to do with women's preventive reproductive health as well as the treating of illness into the mainstream. We shouldn't have a situation where it is difficult for a woman to get the care that she needs at the time that she needs; we shouldn't have a situation where insurance companies that ensure Viagra for men don't insure contraception for women. This is still a country that, for all its pride and its progress of the last years, is under the influence today of a political movement that is turning us back

into the dark ages. I just would hope that there would be a level of vigilance not only among women protecting their own rights but men insisting that this is a part of appropriate family life. If we truly believe in family the way we say we do, we better be doing the things that will allow young people to put off young childbearing, and that will encourage them to put off childbearing until that time when we can have the kind of strong families we seek. I don't think we're going to have it if we allow the people that are in power today to continue to wreak their havoc.

CRK: Yes. Well, thank you very much, thank you very much. I'm going to end this interview now. End of tape two. Laurie Schwab-Zabin.

[Interview ends.]

CRK: This is a recording for Women Who Dared, a project of the Jewish Women's Archive Boston. Today's date is the thirteenth of October 2002 and is a continuation of a previous interview conducted on the twenty-fourth of September 2002. This is an interview [with] Professor Laurie Schwab-Zabin. Could you spell that for me, please?

LSZ: Laurie is L-A-U-R-I-E. Schwab, S-C-H-W-A-B. Zabin, Z-A-B-I-N.

CRK: And interviewer Dr. Chana Revell Kotzin at Dr. Zabin's home in Baltimore,

Maryland. I wanted to continue on with some more questions about the reception of your work. You mentioned that there had been some sort of political setback or public setback in regard to work in your field. Could you tell me a bit more about that?

LSZ: Yes, interestingly enough, all those years working for Planned Parenthood, which was a very activist organization, I rarely encountered any direct problem even though there were very strong opponents to the field. But once in academia, which is supposed to be protected from that kind of problem, there were a couple of episodes, one in particular, that I'll share with you. I think we discussed the fact a little earlier that we had conducted a very successful school program in which we had worked on reducing the rate of adolescent sexual activity and pregnancy very successfully in two schools in Baltimore. In order to measure the impact and really know if it was having an effect, Dr. Janet Hardy, who ran the program, and I, who ran the research, conducted very, very extensive questionnaires in both of those two schools where we subsequently worked before we started to work there and also in two schools that we were not going to work in, in order to use them as controls. In both cases, a big surprise was that instead of parents taking the option of keeping their young people from taking these questionnaires, the parents were extremely enthusiastic. They liked the idea that somebody was interested in the field, they were concerned about it themselves, and we got a very, very supportive reception from all four schools. When the word came out of the success of this program, the head of the school board and the superintendent of schools were both very anxious to talk about what could be done in the future, and this was way back in the mid-'80s. In long discussions with them, I told them of the extreme importance of the questionnaires that we had used and interesting, good foundations in supporting work in the schools because by doing that, they knew that they would be able to have their programs that they supported evaluated. So, the superintendent of schools and the head

of the school board asked if we would undertake the same questionnaire in all the junior and senior high schools in Baltimore. We footed the bill in our department for printing exhaustive questionnaires that had to be printed in a way that cost a lot of money because they had to be code-able, electronically code-able. When I said to them how much groundwork we had done in those four schools to be sure that the parents really understood what we were going to be doing and why we were doing it and that I felt that it was not a very smart idea to be doing the entire city at once without any experience with principals, with the teachers, with the parents, with the young people themselves but they insisted that since it was coming out with their imprimatur that everything would be just fine. Well, it wasn't just fine; somebody gave it to the press the day before it occurred. I was at international meetings in Mexico [and] called from the airport in Texas to find out that we were smeared across the front page of the paper with grave untruths about what we were doing. When I came back, and had to face this and the accusations not just at me personally but at Hopkins for exploiting young people by wanting to ask them questions. When this occurred, I literally got a call from the head of the school board saying, "You're going to have to take all the flak because we can't admit publicly that we asked you to do it." Which I felt was not a proper way for officials to behave, but neither the head of the school board nor the school superintendent ever admitted that this had been their request, that it initiated out of their office. Now one of the things that I found particularly exciting about this was the kind of support that came from the community. For example, people were accusing us of exploiting African American children because the school system was so heavily African American. In fact, some of the very same legislators in Annapolis who spoke on the floor against it called and asked if they could come up and visit, and in the privacy of my office, asked what they could do to help and said for political reasons they had to attack it, but they knew perfectly well that it was being done for very very good and supportive reasons. And Black leadership that I had worked with for years before was incredibly supportive. As it turned out, the schools actually ended up asking us to do it, but by then, the school commissioner was

so scared off by what she'd done that we weren't able ever to do it.

CRK: So that's all the printing [inaudible]?

LSZ: Yes, I don't even know where those thousands are. Probably have been recycled long since. But anyway, it was a very unpleasant episode. It is the kind of thing that shows how much careful preparation does need to be done, and you need to be sure that the people that you are responding to really are willing to stand up and be counted and say what they're doing and why they're doing it.

CRK: I actually now want to completely change tack or at least from this subject and go back to a subject that we had been talking about in the earlier interview about Judaism and how you related to that and how that related to your childhood. Now I want to move really on to your adulthood and ask you whether your relationship with Judaism changed over time, say, for example, when you had children.

LSZ: Yes. As I did mention, I think, as a child, we observed no Jewish ritual at all.

There was great awareness of the fact that we were, in fact, Jewish and very proud of being Jewish. My parents were members of the Stephen Wise Synagogue, which was, even at that time, a very liberal group. They didn't go often. But I know they did at the

high holidays. But we were not drawn into that. Then when I married, my first husband's family were practicing reform Jews. My father-in-law had been president of Temple Emanu-El in New York, and I started to go there on occasion on Friday nights with my then fiancé's grandmother, who lived in New York and rather enjoyed it. It was, of course, very Reform of that era. So when I moved to Baltimore when we moved – my first husband and I – and asked what was the equivalent reform temple in Baltimore, we were very shocked on our first visit to walk in and see a rabbi wearing a talus and wearing a hat. Neither of us had ever seen that before. In fact, the only Hebrew in the service at Temple Emanu-El had been the Shema and the baruch. Other than there, really, it was a very American kind of service, a very English kind of service. So, we were very surprised and thought we walked into the wrong place by mistake when we heard a very heavily Hebrew service when we saw the attire of the rabbi, and so on, and were told no, indeed, that's what Reform was in Baltimore. Well, of course, now it's even more so as I understand the temples have all moved further and further into tradition. We did feel that it was important for the kids to experience religion. My then-husband did not particularly desire that his son be bar mitzvahed, but we did light candles on Friday evenings and very, very, very much loved the words and the sentiments like a bride radiant and joyous comes the sabbath and bringing the hearts of parents to the children and children to the parents. We loved that whole ceremony; our children loved it. We did take them to services on the high holidays and a few other times, but not with any regularity. It was much more important to do that and the Passover, which were the two rituals that we really cared about. In fact, when we did the Passover at our home every year, we included at least one of the kid's friends with their parents so that we could introduce more non-Jews in the community. When we first moved here to Baltimore, it was a reasonably segregated community, which is fortunately not the case, at least for those of us that want it not to be the case. There are still people that do stay with their own group in Baltimore, and I think that's too bad, but that's what they want. But anyway, the kids really took to it. Now the one that has stayed closest to religion, interestingly, is

the one who has been married twice now. Neither were Jewish. No, I think neither of them really are particularly interested in religion, but she has gone in another direction; she has joined the Reconstructionist and is very, very happy in the community that it has created for her. Her older son was bar mitzvahed; her younger son decided he didn't wish to be. The family is again very integrated. Her first husband, who's remained a close, close friend of us all, has a sister who is the dean of the cathedral in Wilmington.

She is an episcopal minister and dean of the cathedral. So the very same weekend that she came for my grandson's bar mitzvah, we all were at the cathedral for her installation, and it is that kind of togetherness. That same daughter does something that I think people might love to hear about; she gives a holiday party each year at which first the menorah is lit, and then the central candle from the menorah is used to light live candles on the Christmas tree. Then when it's all lit, and we've sung both kinds of songs, one of the candles from the Christmas tree is used to light the Kwanzaa lights, which is important and will remain important because her youngest child is an adopted African American child, and it's very important that that tradition be a part of her life. Her older sister married a young man from a Conservative family, but they have never been practicing as a couple.

CRK: [inaudible]

LSZ: That's right. But they did take the whole family – we all went to Israel when their older son was thirteen and just did a family ceremony at Masada, which was lovely.

Once again, our younger son decided that he didn't wish [for] that ritual. My son, who, as I say, was never bar mitzvahed as a young boy, decided to do so when his son was,

and the two of them were bar mitzvahed together at their temple, their Reform temple in Chicago.

CRK: Well, thank you very much for everything that you have taken the time to tell me. Is there anything else that you wanted to add on any subject that you've looked at or covered?

LSZ: No, I think the only other thing that I realized after we separated was that I don't think that I stressed enough since we were speaking of the field of reproductive health, of women's and children's rights, and so on. I don't think I stressed enough how tragic it is that here we are at the beginning of a new century, way behind where we were in the '70s, with an administration that is really endangering all the progress that had been made for so long. I just think it's important for people to understand that and realize that vigilance is needed. A woman who was very wise about the politics of difficult questions like this once said to me how amazing it was that the congress of the United States usually on difficult issues could hammer out compromises, but somehow in this field of reproductive health, they didn't seem to be able to do it. So, I think we need real vigilance because I think we are very, very close to a level of repression of women and of reproduction and of children's rights. I think we're near to really disaster in this field if more people don't get into the act, vote, and make it clear where they stand. We are now gagged in many, many ways. We are not allowed in clinics to talk about abortion to women that ask that question in federally supported facilities. There are many, many problems. Money is now being given for sex education only if it's abstinence, and this is being more and more restrictive all the time, so I just would urge anybody that is exposed

to any of these issues to take action.

CRK: Well, thank you, and thank you very much for everything that you have taken the time to say.

[END OF INTERVIEW]