



EVELYN JACOBS ORTNER

# Center on Family Violence

Winter 2018, Vol. 3, Issue 1



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## DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Happy New Year! The days are short and cold as we welcome 2018 with the optimism brought by new beginnings.

In this newsletter we focus on a universal beginning – childhood. For some, childhood is a time of love, safety, and healthy growth. For others, it is a mix of kindness and harshness, hugs and harm, attachment and abuse.

Two newsletter articles describe the work of Ortner Center Scholars on the long-term consequences of child abuse. One is an interview with Cathy Spatz Widom, a renowned researcher whose work on the intergenerational effects of child maltreatment has multiple implications for policy and practice. The second is by Aishah Shahidah Simmons, a celebrated documentary film-maker, who writes about her work to address sexual abuse during childhood. These two pioneers are among the community of scholars whose work adds to the contributions of the University of Pennsylvania faculty to the mission of the Ortner Center.

But, first, a few highlights of our current and planned work –

### IN PROGRESS

We are exploring, with Penn's School of Social Policy & Practice, the possibility of developing a graduate specialization in violence in relationships. Abuse by a trusted adult – typically a father, step-father, or mother's boyfriend during childhood, a boyfriend or husband during adulthood – is a troubling, common experience. Among the consequences: the U.S. workforce must cope with the debilitating effects of past and on-going abuse. A new academic program must meet multiple scholarly goals, and during the past semester the concept was discussed with program directors, a faculty governance committee, and students. Next we will survey alumni and community partners to help develop the plan and determine its achievability.

Formal coursework, such as the specialization under study, is one way we are helping students become members of a society that can address, prevent, and remediate abuse and violence. Last semester I taught two courses addressing violence in relationships – one an intensive one-week course for MSW students and one an undergraduate Health & Societies course. This semester, Melissa Dichter, Assistant Professor of Medicine, will again offer a course on intimate partner violence, a course that attracts mostly public health and social work students.

Our current work with students includes a unique project with seventeen Penn students who are under the expert supervision of Professor Kathleen Brown and recent Penn graduate Devan Spear. The students

are interviewing nine women incarcerated at Pennsylvania's two prisons for women, inmates who were recommended by prison staff as candidates for the commutation of their sentence. A history of abuse beginning in childhood is common among these prisoners. Many are growing old and sometimes frail as they serve longer sentences than current guidelines would allow. The students will draft a report about each inmate for the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons. The commutation application and review process can take years and their work is an essential step in the process.

### COMING EVENTS

The back page of the newsletter highlights two events scheduled for the coming months. First is a talk by Cathy Spatz Widom; the interview with her in this newsletter provides a sense of her work. Her presentation, at noon on February 1st, is co-sponsored with CHOP (Children's Hospital of Philadelphia) and others.

The second event addresses child abuse in the context of sports. The Sports and Fitness Industry Association estimates that over 25 million U.S. children – more than the entire population of New York state and Colorado – are playing an organized sport. Participation in sports should enhance development but Olympic athletes have been in the news lately, not about their achievements, but about the abuse they suffered. Current news focuses on coaches a perpetrators; elite athletes – college, Olympic, and professional athletes – are sometimes perpetrators as well as victims.

The Ortner Center is partnering with ChildUSA to host a conference about athletes and abuse. Four panels of experts – representatives of the NCAA and professional sports, advocates, researchers, athletes, and others – will address abuse in childhood, high school and college, Olympic, and professional sports. The conference is scheduled for the day before the annual Penn Relays begin, which will provide the sports reporters covering that event the opportunity to interview the conference speakers. Sports have been described as one of the last frontiers in exposing abuse because relatively little is known about it. The conference will focus on the importance of ensuring that sports are a healthy and growth-enhancing experience.

The Newsletter can bring only a sample of what is happening at the Center. We send updates once or twice a month via e-mail to be sure that you know about Ortner news and upcoming events.

I close by thanking each of you who supported the Center in 2017. We appreciate your investment and confidence in our work.

– Susan B. Sorenson

Safe daughters

Confident women

Strong society