

salute to scholars

Professors at Work

**Making
the City –
and the World –
Better for All**

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A Transformative Voice for

By Cathy Rainone

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN has reached epidemic proportions in the United States, and over the past decade more than 20,000 American children have died as a result of abuse, neglect, malnourishment and poverty, according to the U.S. Department of Health.

These are some of the shocking statistics cited by experts from the fields of neuroscience, social sciences and public health at the National Consultation to End Childhood Abuse and Violence Against Children, convened by Brooklyn College's Children's Studies Center for Research, Policy and Public Service.

To Gertrud Lenzer, who runs the center, the figures are no surprise. A sociologist at Brooklyn College and at the CUNY Graduate Center, she has been tracing this trend since the 1960s. In 1991, Lenzer founded the Children's Studies program to draw attention to children's rights as human beings and to bring new understanding of children's needs and desires.

"My assessment of the situation was that children as an entire class really were not given enough attention," says Lenzer, who was

born in Germany during World War II and came to the U.S. in 1962. "The women's movement came and we were able to mobilize for ourselves, but the class of children cannot represent themselves, legally and otherwise. It's the adults who are representing them and making decisions for them until they are 18 years old. The fact that the children were invisible by and large, had no voice, were not represented, that's what moved me toward establishing Children's Studies. It's really representation by way of knowledge."

Lenzer thought the study of children was very segmented, and academic disciplines like child psychology, education, pediatrics of children and sociology were just "taking a small bite out of the whole." "We cannot arrive at a comprehensive understanding of children by simply accumulating, aggregating and adding up segmented findings from far-flung varieties of inquiries in the various disciplines," she once wrote. Lenzer envisioned a new program that would bring knowledge about children from various fields under one roof.

Children' Studies, recently renamed Children and Youth Studies, provides a comprehensive look at children, from birth to



Gertrud Lenzer, who founded the Children's Studies Center for Research, Policy and Public Service in 1997

The programs allows you to see them as human beings, you can see them for who they are.”

Lenzer's passion for protecting children was sparked by research she did on their working conditions in 19th-century England. At the University of Leicester in 1967 she studied original copies of the Royal Commission reports, which described the long hours and unhealthy conditions of working children.

“I vividly remember the detailed and most moving quotations from the interviews the inspectors conducted with these children and young people who worked in mines and collieries, factories and agricultural gangs,” says Lenzer. “You would even get an insight into the working conditions of small children, who were doing the transfer prints in the production of elegant china, or those of chimney sweeps.”

Lenzer joined the Brooklyn College faculty in 1971. The work she has done in England and other research she has conducted over the years made her realize that children had few legal rights and society had failed to provide a voice for their protection. In 1991, she founded the Sociology of Children as a new section of the American Sociological Association. She led Brooklyn College's efforts to become the first academic institution to develop the Children's Studies Program, now taught in colleges across the United States and abroad. In March, Lenzer attended the “Children Studies as an Interpretative Perspective” conference at the Institute of Polish Philology, University in Bialystok, Poland. The university is eager to establish a Children Studies Center modeled on the one at Brooklyn College.

Lenzer believed that the Children Studies program needed a strong advocacy component and in 1997 she founded the Children Studies Center for Research, Policy and Public Service, which focuses on protecting the human rights of children. Since its inception the center has organized several forums and conferences on child policy in New York, including the National Consultation, Social Justice for Children: To End Childhood Abuse and Violence Against Children. It has also spurred legislative initiatives to establish an independent office of Child Advocate in New York State.

“As a scholar and as a citizen, I think it's one's responsibility that when things are in a state where one in three children are living in poverty in New York City and 2 million children are homeless in the United States, that we do something about it,” says Lenzer.

In June, Lenzer represented the center at the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in Geneva, Switzerland and at its Pre-sessional Working Group, where she submitted the “Alternative Report of the Children's Studies Center on Measures Giving Effect to the Optional Protocol to the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography.”

“We were delighted that our report to the UN committee was well received, and we're delighted to be part of the international agenda and treaty development,” says Lenzer.

Lenzer is constantly working to improve the program and the center in the effort to better serve her students.

“I'm very committed to the students here; it's really teaching in the trenches. Many of our students come from lower- and middle-class backgrounds, many are minority students. But our students are success stories to have made it here. . . It's a very fulfilling way of not only teaching students but helping them map out their careers.”

Children's Rights

18 years of age. It's an interdisciplinary program that offers specialized courses such as the human rights of children, children and the law, child abuse and neglect, children and the media, as well as courses taught by participating departments like African Studies, English and History.

From early on the idea was that what we know about children, what we can learn, and what we understand about them is what really represents them, says Lenzer. “The academic field is a way of representing children.”

Natalie Williams, co-director of the Garden House School, a private preschool in Manhattan, had a major in psychology and a minor in Children's Studies at Brooklyn College. Unlike education and psychology, she says, Children's Studies focused on the understanding of a child as a whole and learning from children. She recommends Children's Studies to anyone who's planning to work as a child educator, psychologist, pediatrician or prosecutor.

“Children Studies gave me a more holistic view of children,” says Williams, who graduated from Brooklyn College in 1999. “It allowed me to look at the world through the child's eye, it gave me the reverence, love and respect for children and who they are as individuals.