

Mildred Winter 7-30-2014 PAT

- Mildred: I'm Mildred Winter, the founding director of the Parents as Teachers Program.
- William: Would you tell me a little bit about your background: where you were born, where you went to school.
- Mildred: I'm a product of the St. Louis Public School System, born and raised in St. Louis, went through the system here from kindergarten through teacher's college.
- William: Where did you go to teacher's college?
- Mildred: Paris Teachers College, operated by the St. Louis Public Schools.
- William: So then did you start teaching?
- Mildred: I started teaching but not in the St. Louis Public Schools because I got married shortly after graduation and you could not teach in the city schools if you were a married woman.
- William: So, where did you go?
- Mildred: They wanted their teachers to devote their full time and energy to their teaching career until they had time for family, husbands and children.
- William: So where did you go to teach?
- Mildred: I started my teaching career in St. Louis County in the Berkeley School District. The policy in St. Louis County at the time that I began teaching was that they would not hire you unless you had two years experience, minimum but I went for an interview anyway and the superintendent of the Berkeley system, after looking through my credentials, said, "I see that you taught on the summer playgrounds in the City of St. Louis," and I said, "That's true," and he said, "Although our policy is, we don't hire anybody as a teacher who doesn't have a minimum of two years experience, anyone who can survive teaching on the summer playgrounds in the City of St. Louis can surely control a classroom so I'm going to make an exception and offer you a job."
- William: Let's start a little bit about, how did the idea come about to start Parents as Teachers?

Mildred: As a kindergarten teacher, I found out first-hand that children's chance for success in school, the foundation for school success was really laid in the home in the early years when teachers, their primary teachers were their parents.

William: Did you just observe that some children came to you more prepared than others?

Mildred: Yes, and we had a need to reduce the number of children entering our schools would need for special help because of the early experiences or lack thereof during their preschool years. I will always remember a proud father bringing his young boy to my class, kindergarten class on the first day of school and saying, "You're really going to like having Bobby in your class because I ain't taught him nothing." He was giving me this blank slate on which to write my magic.

William: So how did the actual program start?

Mildred: The actual program started when I was director of Early Education in the Ferguson Florissant School District where I had served as a kindergarten teacher. I was concerned at the lack of success of many children in our kindergarten program and I was reading the research that came out of the 1960's that said that children learn more and at a faster pace during their early years than they ever will at any comparable period in their lifetime. Accepting that as a fact, I thought it would be a good idea to try to improve those pre-kindergarten experiences by working with their first teachers, their parents, in the home in the year before kindergarten to help them get ready for school. So we initiated a program of home teaching by parents, home visiting in four schools where children had the lowest performance in kindergarten. Teachers went into the homes and worked with the parents and the children on learning activities using every day learning materials that every home had, no fancy gimmicks or toys. At kindergarten entry, we test all of our children going into kindergarten and the children who had been in this program outscored all the others in every area of development. This included children who had gone to private kindergarten, Head Start...I mean, not private pre-school...Head Start, or no pre-school at all. So, the St. Louis Post Dispatch covered the story and called it "a quiet revolution in education." This was really the forerunner of the Parents as Teachers Program. We knew that

starting at four was not early enough but it made sense to start there and move downward.

William: So, did the school district fund this original...

Mildred: We used federal and state money for innovation in education. The school district sponsored some. In 1972, the Missouri Department of Education adopted a position paper on early childhood education. Calling on the public schools to support and assist parents in their children's development in the years before kindergarten, not by taking children out of the home and putting them in a pre-school situation but helping the parents in the home to make the best of their early learning years.

William: When you expanded beyond the first four schools, how did that happen? Did the state get involved?

Mildred: Before we started with the first four schools, the Department of Education sponsored two invitational conferences called "Conference for Decision-Makers" in which we invited leaders from education, from health, from government, all walks of life, leaders to come together and hear the researchers in person talk to them about what happens in the beginning years of life. After the second Conference for Decision-Makers, we had a brainstorming session. Commissioner Mallory, Burton White, who was one of the researchers who had spent his career studying learning in the home beginning at birth, the author of the best seller at the time, "The First Three Years of Life." The education consultant, Jane Payne, from the Danforth Foundation, who had sponsored Burton White's presentation at the conference, and myself, and we decided it was time to try a four-year study involving four school districts that would be representative of the State of Missouri to begin to work with parents during the third trimester of pregnancy until the child's third birthday and give them the best possible start in life. The districts were chosen on the basis of competitive proposal. The top ranking proposal was submitted by the City of St. Louis but the Board of Education of St. Louis said, "We don't need a program like that." So they declined to participate; had some of their staff trained but did not participate, which was a disappointment but we had four great years of program development under the consultant services of Burton White.

William: Okay, go ahead.

Mildred: All right. In 1984, there was an independent evaluation done of the children who'd been in that program looking at them in all areas of development, compared to their counterparts in those same communities who did not participate in the program. I want to backtrack a minute and say that the parents who participated in the program, some 380 of them, were all first time parents with children born between December of '81 and September of '82. We wanted no prior child-rearing experience to contaminate the study. The independent evaluation done by Research and Training Associates of Oberlin Park, Kansas, found the children in the study far superior in all areas of development over the comparison group children. Ted Fiske, the new education editor of the New York Times learned about this program from Burton White and came to visit and asked Commissioner Mallory for an exclusive on this program and the findings. Commissioner Mallory gave him that privilege but said "Not too many people in Missouri read the New York Times. I want to be able to publish this in the Missouri papers as well." To our surprise, people all over the world read the New York Times and we became besieged with telephone calls and letters from virtually around the world saying, "We want to know what you did and how you did it. How can we learn to do what you did?" That was the beginning of expansion beyond the State of Missouri.

William: Were you still a kindergarten teacher while this study was going on?

Mildred: No, I had moved to director of Early Education for the Ferguson Florissant District and then was offered the position of the Missouri's first director of Early Childhood Education.

William: And that was Mallory that asked you to do that?

Mildred: Yes, he did. In 1972, the Missouri Department of Educator adopted a position paper calling on the public schools to support (Parents?) in the years before kindergarten and in my first meeting with Commissioner Mallory, he said to me, "Now, we don't have a road map of how we're going to make this happen. We're going to place that responsibility in your hands but don't ever do anything to make us look foolish." Those were good words of advice.

William: So, were you excited about this opportunity?

Mildred: Well, I was surprised when I told my family about the offer to take the position but they were supportive, saying, "Hey, here you have a chance to make a difference beyond the local school district." Of course, I was the one that had to do traveling around the state. I knew very little about education in Missouri outside of the very forward-looking district in which I worked and I soon found out that I was like a missionary, preaching the Gospel of early education. Superintendents said things to me like, "What? Work with children before kindergarten? Isn't kindergarten just glorified sandbox?" So I had a big job and was privileged to call on leaders around the state, in the colleges, in school districts who were doing things in early childhood who were willing to come together periodically and frame this program without a penny of compensation because they believed, as I did, in the results that would come from it.

William: So, once you'd proven that it's really good in the four districts, what happened then? How did you expand?

Mildred: Well, we were fortunate in that, at the time that we were doing the pilot study, Kit Bond, the governor of Missouri, became a first-time father at age 40 and, although Jefferson City was not one of the pilot sites, I supplied him and his wife with all the materials that we were using with children and parents in the pilot study and he became sold on the helpfulness of the program to him and to Carolyn, as parents and he vowed to make expansion of this program state-wide in his second term of office. So his career was interrupted by Walking Joe Teasdale but when he was reelected, he did follow through in urging the legislature and he trooped up and down the state with Burton White to sell the idea of what we had developed here and Burton White's favorite saying to parents when he would meet with them or the public, was, "You get more information with your new car than you do with your new baby." So, Senate Bill 658 was created and submitted to the legislature to provide state money to provide developmental screening and parent education to families with children, birth to five. It was not the first time we had tried to get money for this. We had tried for seven years but were always successful in passing the legislation in the House, always unsuccessful in the Senate due largely to the work of a pediatrician, no less, who was a senator and said, "Educators had no business screening children; that was the work of the pediatrician." But it was the evaluation in 1984, the

release of the evaluation results in 1985 that really developed support for expanding the program across the state.

William: Were there other parents other than Kit Bond who were outside those four districts who were asking for information?

Mildred: Yes, there were and we also had opposition from a group on the far right who saw this program as a communist plot. An effort to identify parents whose children were developmentally delayed or whatever and send government workers in to remove the children from their parents for child abuse. As whacky as that sounds, there were people who subscribed to that.

William: How big is the organization, Parents as Teachers, at the point where you're expanding, when you got government money? Do you have a large staff and are you hiring teachers around the state?

Mildred: From the beginning, the office of director of Early Childhood Education meant one person and a part-time secretary. I was never blessed with a staff to work with me. I called on people around the state who were experts in the field to volunteer their services to develop materials and spread the program. It was a very low budget item from the beginning.

William: Do you have teachers going into the home now? Are those people volunteers?

Mildred: They were paid, of course. They were paid by the local school districts and, I might say, and this exists today, most of them were hired for less than full-time so they wouldn't generate any benefits. The parent educators who go into the homes are the jewels in the crown of Parents as Teachers. It's to them that the credit goes for the success of the program because they made it happen.

William: The parents that agreed to do this, were they...

Mildred: Yes, we were surprised at the eagerness of parents to enter into this partnership with the school. Think about the pilot project days, when each school district participating was to enlist about 100 families and with these first-time parents, children born between December of '81 and September of '82. Think about parents and all of their anxieties, willing to commit to a program that was going to help ensure their child's

success in kindergarten five years down the road. The program had to have had value or they would not have stayed with it for that length of time.

William: Well, I'm sure they got to read the study that showed how successful the children who had been in the program were?

Mildred: Right, right, but I'm talking about the very first families, the 380 who were in the pilot project. They came in on good faith but the parent educators who went in to work with them certainly proved their value.

William: When was the decision made that that's how you would promote this by sending teachers into the home?

Mildred: Well, that started with the program for four-year-olds when I was with the Ferguson Florissant School District. The Parents as Teachers Program beginning in pregnancy really was modeled after that home teaching model for parents of four-year-olds that we developed in Ferguson Florissant.

William: Getting the Early Childhood Act passed in 1984 was certainly an interesting experience. Tell us about how you interacted with the Missouri legislature and Kit Bond at the time.

Mildred: Yes, well, Kit, personally, has a great responsibility for the passage of that legislation through some personal efforts of working with legislators and also with the public and often with Burton White at his side. I, personally, as a Department of Education employee, visited with legislators to inform them about all that had gone before and what our goals were and what the costs would be, what the gains would be, so there was a lot of personal contact.

William: Soon after the program was functioning all across Missouri, you started getting calls from the educators in other states and even other countries. Why do you think that happened?

Mildred: Well, it was certainly due to the articles in the New York Times. It amazed us that that was so widespread and we immediately had to think about how a state could respond to interest for training and observation of what we were doing from around the world. Therefore, Peter McGraw, who was President of the University of Missouri system, agreed with

Commissioner Mallory that the University of Missouri-St. Louis, should provide office space for what was to be created as a Parents as Teachers national center. I left the Department of Education as director of Early Childhood Education to become the director of the Parents as Teachers national center with the responsibility given to me by the department to develop a training program, not only for the State of Missouri to carry out Senate Bill 658, we had more than 500 school districts in Missouri that were mandated to implement this program in one short year but also, we needed to prepare how to include people from other parts of the world in our training so that they could go home and do likewise.

William: Did that expand to your staff at that point?

Mildred: Commissioner Mallory said to the university presidents, the state campuses, "I know you are eager to train people to do the Parents as Teachers model as part of your early education teacher preparation. I will not have the program bastardized. The training will be done only by the people who made the program happen." So one parent educator was chosen from each of the four participating districts and myself made up the training team that trooped around the state and held week long training sessions for prospective parent educators and administrators around the state in one year. It was a vigorous schedule.

William: Five hundred districts in one year is a lot of traveling.

Mildred: Right.

William: So obviously it went well.

Mildred: Yes.

William: Then you moved on beyond the university. Is that because the organization grew so large?

Mildred: It grew and we needed expanded quarters over what the university could afford us. In addition, the university could see the success of the program and felt that if we were to be expanding in the direction we were going and they were offering housing to us, that they should own the program and the university asked the Department of Education to transfer ownership of the program to them. The Department was not willing to



give over this public school program that they had created and so we moved off campus to other quarters.

William: Where was that?

Mildred: We had a couple different locations before we moved to the expanded office now, yeah, in St. Louis County.

William: Are you surprised by the growth of the Parents as Teachers over the last 30 years?

Mildred: I have to admit that I am. I felt when we were doing the study, I hoped, of course, for success but I felt that success might be measured in replication of the program in a few other enterprising Missouri school districts. I never even dreamed of expanding across the State of Missouri, much less than in all 50 states, eight foreign countries. I have to say that was a dream come true.

William: Were you actually personally involved in the expansion into other states and other countries? Did it all come through your office?

Mildred: It came through the national office of the Parents as Teachers that was created when I left the department, assumed that role.

William: So that became a national office at that point?

Mildred: Right.

William: To go beyond, you must have, at that point, had a lot of people involved in it. It must have become a lot harder to personally handle all the stuff that was going on.

Mildred: Right. I think when I left...I retired from that position in 2000 and I think at that time we had a staff at the national center of about 50 people and it's grown beyond that now but we also developed a system of state leaders so that there were people...a leader designated in each state that was initiating the PAT programs which worked out very well because programs had to be tailored to the needs of every individual state.

William: Right, and so they started state organizations...

Mildred: Yes.

William: But the general office still...

Mildred: And we called the state leaders together on an annual basis and communicated with them continually and had advanced training and from these states, we also developed a national training team so that we had...all the training didn't have to be done here in Missouri. We might send one member, let's say, to Virginia to do training but then there would be a Virginia training team developed and so on so that each state could meet its own needs.

William: I know you also were developing curriculum.

Mildred: Oh, yes.

William: Was that all done by the national center?

Mildred: The national center developed the curriculum, that's right, but we called on people from other states to contribute and a significant development in the curriculum came with the addition of the cooperation with the team of neuroscientists from Washington University in St. Louis. That was called our "Born to Learn" curriculum that was issued in 1990 as a result of that collaboration with science.

William: Well, that's wonderful. What do you think that the legacy of this organization is going to be in the future? Do you think it's going to continue to expand?

Mildred: It seems to be on that track. The national center continues to train people from around the world. People come here...an interesting example, I think, is the country of New Zealand which provides free childcare and pre-school to all of its young children without cost, free, and you don't have to qualify by economic need or anything. All you have to do is ask for it. The minister of education came to St. Louis and spent four weeks observing the Parents as Teachers program while we were housed at (Amsel?) and I had the privilege of going to New Zealand to participate in the training of their people nationwide to implement this program and of special interest there is New Zealand's treatment of its native population which are called the Maori and they have great respect for their native population. All the correspondence that I received as director of the national center from the country of New Zealand opened with a Maori blessing and closed with a Maori prayer. When I went to

New Zealand, they asked me to visit their Maori programs to be sure that they were of the utmost quality. I was very impressed. It's the only expansion of the Parents as Teachers program on a nationwide basis to this point.

William: Have there continued to be studies to show the success of the program?

Mildred: We had a number of follow-up studies of the original studies; in other words, how do these children perform in kindergarten and so on? Were there gains maintained? Were the states in the programs able to replicate what we had done in the pilot study. So there are a number of studies from Texas, New York, other places, where they had replicated our model and showed similar gains. The district in which I still live, the Ferguson Florissant District in St. Louis County, has mapped the progress of their Parents as Teachers children from pilot project through high school and continues to do that every year in subsequent programs and they have found that children who participate in the PAT Program, their scores on standardized tests given throughout the child's education career, all the way through high school, the PAT kids outscore everybody. So that's proof to them that the program does work for them. It worked then and it still works now.

William: Well, you should be very proud, Mildred.

Mildred: I am.

William: Can you talk a little more about working with the neuroscientists at Wash U?

Mildred: Yes, that was a very interesting development. In 1995, I received Pioneer in Education Award from the Dana Foundation in New York. That foundation gives an annual award in education and in science for innovation and in the year that I won the award, as I talked with the winner of their science award, who turned out to be a neuroscientist from the University of California-Berkeley, we decided that education and brain science had a lot in common and we needed to learn from each other. So I submitted a proposal to the Dana Foundation to fund our collaboration with the Washington University neuroscience community so that as educators, we could enrich our curriculum with scientific evidence of brain development that parents could foster along with their other areas of development. They gave me the names of five

neuroscientists they were funding at Washington University. I was asked to enlist their support and interest in a joint project with them and each one of them said, "Well, it sounds like you're doing a great thing but it doesn't match with what we do. We lecture and we teach students about early brain development and what can be done to foster but we don't work with educators." I asked them each to go on a home visit with a parent educator, visiting a family of a child with special needs. Each one went and said, "We're convinced that we have information that could benefit these parents and how, in their every day interaction with them, they can enhance their child's brain development." So the collaboration was begun and we had selected staff trained by the neuroscientists and we were examined, just like any student and had to write up the information that we thought parents needed to know about how they impacted their child's brain development. We put it in terms that parents could understand. They reviewed and critiqued all the information for scientific accuracy. As a result, we developed what was called the "Born to Learn curriculum. The only early childhood curriculum to date that I know of that exists that embodies science in education and really affirms what the parent educator is saying, she's talking not only from education from a scientific standpoint. The McCormick Foundation of Chicago funded the development of videotapes of these neuroscientists talking to parents in their language and parent educators then were given copies of the videotapes they took on home visits for the parent to hear, first-hand, from the neuroscience, about their child's developing brain. That's quite a unique development in addition to our curriculum.

William: Did the neuroscientists start doing studies on the program as well?

Mildred: That, I don't have any record of.

William: So they kind of maintained it wasn't quite the same thing.

Mildred: Right, right.

William: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about the program?

Mildred: Well, I guess I am pleased at the broad support across Missouri and across the country and even churches have had people trained to offer the program through their congregation. So it's just a winner.

Mildred Winter 7-30-2014 PAT

William: Is the organization still part of the higher education or the education of the state or...

Mildred: The Education Commission of the States is made up of legislators and governors and it was the Education Commission of the States that nominated me for the Dana Award which was the beginning of the whole neuroscience...

William: I guess I meant, is it still a state organization, Parents as Teachers?

Mildred: It's a national...international...

William: Right, so it's a not-for-profit...

Mildred: It's a not-for-profit host annual international conferences. We have attendance from all across the world, work hard at trying to interest the business world in investing in young children. That's the future of our nation, of all nations and, you know, pre-school is important but it's not enough. If you don't get the parent informed and involved, pre-school can only do so much. The parent is there 24 hours a day.

William: Do the parents have to pay for this program in any way?

Mildred: Not in Missouri. I don't know about other states or countries. I know about New Zealand. Australia does not charge either but I can't say that about every...surprisingly enough, China has Parents as Teachers funded not by the government but by a wealthy woman who is paying for home visitation by pre-school programs so it takes a different complexion according to the country or the city or state or whatever.

William: Does Kit Bond continue to be involved?

Mildred: He has been our champion and has said that the PAT program is his proudest accomplishment, and rightly so. As a politician, no one could have worked harder to make it happen in Missouri.

William: Well, Mildred, I think you should also be very proud of what you've accomplished and I thank you very much for the interview.

Mildred: Thank you for the opportunity.