

A PERSONAL WORD FOR YOU from Mack McCarter June/July 1999

“Overcoming The Odds”

In 1992 Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith published a bombshell. They had gone to the island of Kauai, Hawaii thirty years earlier to conduct a bold experiment. Their thesis was both imaginative and explosive. They wanted to find out how some children, born in the direst of circumstances which combined economic and emotional deprivation in a lethal mix of despair, could possibly become competent and caring adults.

So they found 600 pregnant women and determined to follow the lives of their offspring from prenatal to the age of thirty! They were able to effectively study 505 lives for thirty years! Their story is told in the book, *Overcoming the Odds*, published by Cornell University Press, 1992. And I must tell you that their findings, which I first read in 1995, have become the basis for our goals in each of our neighborhood ICUs.

Here is a scientific study which documents the necessary ingredients for rising above an environment which was crushing at best. It is the only thirty year longitudinal study I know of that provides the evidence so critical for constructing a ladder up for kids (and adults for that matter) to climb.

In the face of massive obstacles, how do some children become whole and healthy human beings?

That was the question. So for thirty years they watched, wrote, and quietly recorded. Their findings are a springboard to hope for everyone.

Here in their own words they tell of their quest: *The principal goals of our investigation were to document, in natural-history fashion, the course of all pregnancies and their outcomes in the entire community from birth until the offspring had reached adulthood, and to assess the long-term consequences of prenatal complications and adverse rearing convictions on the individuals' development and adaptation to life.*

To Werner and Smith's amazement over fifty of the children not only survived through conditions which should have made even sane development almost impossible, they actually withstood the pressures of disintegration and grew into caring and achieving adults rearing healthy children themselves! How did that happen?

Here is where Werner and Smith are so valuable to us. They did not have to guess. They had documented proof that clearly showed the factors present which built the lives of those fifty kids. (They called these “the resilient group.”) They found three clusters of “protective factors” which enabled these youngsters to make it though.

First, they each had at least average intelligence and a personality disposition which elicited positive reactions from family members, friends, and strangers. Second, they had strong affectional ties with parent substitutes which encouraged trust, autonomy, and initiative. And third, they each had an external support system in church, youth groups, or school which rewarded competence and provided them with a sense of coherence.

Each of these three clusters of “protective factors” is broken down into a list of ten factors. Those ten factors are on the wall of our Strategy Room and provide for us the goals as well as the programmatic content of our ICU Children and Youth Groups. We are working daily to see that we put those factors to work in the lives of the neighborhood kids. We are seeing incredible life changes occur!!

Werner and Smith close their remarkable book with this paragraph: *The life stories of the resilient youngsters now grown into adulthood teach us that competence, confidence, and caring can flourish, even under adverse circumstances, if children encounter persons who provide them with the secure basis for the development of trust, autonomy, and initiative. From odds successfully overcome springs hope – a gift each of us can share with a child – at home, in the classroom, on the playground, or in the neighborhood.*

Let me illustrate *Overcoming The Odds* in Highland. Last August Phillip and Prescola Williamson moved into our ICU Friendship House on Prospect Street. In September they began working with middle school age youth. At the first meeting, two showed up. One was their son, the other his best friend. Undeterred, they began working our neighborhood penetration plan. Soon 20, then 40, and now over sixty youngsters are in their orbit of caring.

These youth are stroked and encouraged. Some of their stories would break your heart. Yet, there are strict rules of behavior and achievement. There are attendance requirements, and service to others is not optional. Points are given which build toward a week of camp at Branson, Missouri, called Kids Across America.

Phillip was stern with these kids, but they knew he loved them totally. Three weeks ago they started their own company with the help of Junior Achievement. It is called, "The Highland No-Limit Company." Their motto, on their business cards is: "No Job Is Too Small." They have company officers and they just completed their first week of work. They mowed nine yards and painted a whole house. They are beginning to believe that they can conquer they world! One year ago they were on the streets. Today they are working and they are serving. But what is infinitely more valuable, is this: ***they are dreaming and hoping!!*** Now isn't that something!!

I want to be a part of any great challenge that can overcome the odds. I want you to be a part, too. Please, if you haven't joined The Mission Team, call us today. Come march with us into a new tomorrow.