



First-hand Insights

A PUBLICATION OF **Children's Trust Fund**

HERO HIGHLIGHTS, INTERVIEW #1: RICH HENNICKE, RETIRED DIRECTOR, NURSES FOR NEWBORNS, ST. LOUIS, MO

This document is a transcript of a length-edited audio interview between Rich Henicke and CTF Executive Director, Emily van Schenk Hof, recorded November, 2021. The audio file may be accessed at <https://ctf4kids.org/2022/02/hero-highlights-interview-1-rich-henicke/>

EMILY:

So, I guess my first question for you is, why do you think you were called to do this work? How did you end up working for Nurses for Newborns for 18 years? Like, how did this happen?

RICH:

A strange set of circumstances... I had just left the wonderful work of the Leadership with the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Nationally, I was the Executive Director for the National Office here in St. Louis, and I was looking for an opportunity to work closer to home, because that role had me traveling all over the country. And honestly, I was praying at the time I got a phone call from Sharon Rohrbach - I was praying a little prayer that the Jesuit use, kind of discerning things - Sharon gives me a call and says, "we have a position that we're looking for and we think you might be a candidate." So that's kind of how that came into being.

When I got to meet Sharon - Emily, the thing that was striking about her - Sharon's soul shines through all the time, and the center of her passion are the babies that she has helped to protect and give life in so many ways. So, it was inspiring to be with her. She was a person who, unlike a lot of religious leaders, she was really about the practice of walking the talk. She just did what was needed, almost to a fault. Because she put every nickel we earned into operations, which was wonderful for the babies that we served that year, but then what about next year kind of thing? So, we all had to work together to make it a sustainable effort.

(Rich) The thing about it was that the work is so inspiring, first of all, because that was convened by a leader who believed it in her soul and shared that in a way that let you see it constantly. And then the work itself - having the privilege of working with partners who went into the home as a partner with parents. Work is, with newborns, as you know so well from the Children's Trust Funds legacy of helping to promote the protective factors for children, it's really about supporting that parent so that she or they, he, whoever it might be, is able to have the tools and the support necessary to be successful.

And this was just unbelievable work, because my work before this, before I worked with St. Vincent de Paul, was with Catholic Family Services. And our work was oftentimes at a later stage in the child's life or in the family's life. And the issues that were there would have been so much easier to deal with and may have never occurred if there had been support earlier in that family's life. So, it was just so revolutionary for me to be a part of it and then given the chance... I got to meet all these fantastic people, including yourself and others with the Children's Trust Fund and researchers and professional colleagues, amazing volunteers... And each of them had this power of passion about them that preceded or infused or informed and inspired their work on behalf of the babies.

EMILY:

So one of the things I think about a lot... I think back to what I was doing, you know, ten years ago and how my hat was on then, and now how my hat's on, and I think about some of this and I'm like, "gosh, I wish I hadn't have had to learn that lesson that way." So I think my question for you is when you look back on your on your career, what are some things that you wish you would have known earlier or things that you learned as you got older and as you became more mature? What are some things that you wish you'd understood earlier in your career?

RICH:

That's a terrific question. I've made so many mistakes in my life that it gets to be difficult, which one I want to pick. But sometimes it's just trusting... With Nurses for Newborns, our work was not tied to any sectarian perspective. It truly was the babies, you know, and all that, all that was about those babies. But its inspiration was something deeper in a sense of a faith commitment. And so to recognize that there's something bigger going on here, that, don't get too lost in yourself... There's a whole lot of other folks with you, and sometimes there's just... courses that you don't even know are about this. And so, trust it, and go ahead... go ahead and do. I think those were painful lessons, but graces that came into my life over time.

Too long... and I share this with my students very much too... too long, I felt like I had to carry it on my shoulders. And, of course, that's a very incorrect perspective. It has all kinds of psychological issues, but it also has something to do with just the basics of human interaction, and that is that we're social creatures, and when we attend to

(Rich) that dimension of ourself, we're better off. That was a biggie for me. And I have to keep learning it, because I get lost in my own little world and ways of looking at things, and so I'm grateful for those who open the windows and say, "hey, there's something more here."

EMILY:

So, this might be a harder question, too, but, what were some of the challenges that you faced doing child abuse and neglect prevention work, or, what are some of the things that come to mind of just some of the hard times that you went through in your career trying to make things better for babies and families?

RICH:

Yeah, probably my biggest primary effort, of course, was I was trying to encourage the funding of services. So that was probably the largest part of my work - was trying to find resources to support the protection, the efforts to support and provide for, in many different ways, the well-being of children. So that's probably the biggest part of my work. But I also found it difficult when I would find legislative and governmental entities, as well as others in the larger field, who just would either ignore or choose to do things that were obviously not helpful. I know you have a background, too, in the world of the advocates and advocacy, and that that was difficult for me. And in fact, sometimes people would try to suggest I could do something in the public sector that way, and I said I could not. There's no way I could, because it would eat me alive. Again, I have to separate myself from those issues in a way that I can still be functional, and that (public advocacy work) would overtake me.

So that was one of the most painful and difficult parts of our work, because we could raise funds and we could do good things for those babies that we were working with and of course, you had to keep improving and growing and learning. But if we had policies that would take away Medicaid or just disrupt basic kinds of health requirements, you would lose half of what you just did! And limitations on budgets that would limit budgetary dollars to the future of the state seemed to be so counter indicated - it seemed to be so painfully shortsighted - that I kept thinking about the future of our state and our nation and even our own personal families, you know, and thinking, this is just so wrong. I'd say those were some of the bigger challenges.

For a while, we were too much attending to our own little sectors - you know, each organization kind of "sectoring." And I think we worked better... as I was finishing my career... I think there was more attentiveness to trying to make things work together. I think funders helped encourage that, and perhaps the challenges of the state and federal government also sometimes helped us to force ourselves into doing that. But that was a painful thing, and I was, in my early days - it's one of those mistaken things - I was really pushing so much for our agency. And that's valuable, but it's never complete.

(Rich) So, you have to always have this readiness to know there's another space that might be a new possibility if you keep your eyes and ears open. So, if you don't do that, then there's more problems.

EMILY:

Everything you're saying really resonates with me. Those challenges are some of my very similar challenges.

RICH:

Yes. We had some legislators on our board, and they were good people, wonderful people, but sometimes I just talked to them, I said, "I don't know how you stay in there." You know, just how do you how do you stay in a House or Senate, wherever it might be, when you know so much of this is wrong? You know, I was so grateful that they would hang in there.

EMILY:

Yeah. I feel the same way.

RICH:

You know, I know.

EMILY:

During the lobbying that I do, one thing that's interesting to me is that you, if you sit down and talk to people who are doing things that just make your head want to explode, I almost always can leave those conversations understanding a little bit more about where they came from. And my goal is always to hopefully have them understand where I was coming from, from just a tiny bit of a perspective. I can't "revolutionize" you in one conversation, but I can soften you up and perhaps get you to see another side, and sometimes that feels like enough.

RICH:

Thank you. Thank you for keeping those conversations going.

EMILY:

It is very rewarding. So my next question would be for you... So, when I think about like how I want to run the Children's Trust Fund, and what's important to me, I realize that I have values, obviously, and things that are really key to me as a professional, and that I seek to make a part of our organization. And some of them, though, are just about me personally and how I do business. And so I guess my question for you is, what were some of your key philosophies about how you did your work that were important to you?

RICH:

Thanks, Emily. I guess I was blessed to be a part of some good people and their lives, and so I think anything that I happen to come across that's been useful, it's probably (that) I "sponged" it from somebody else. But some of the things I've come to appreciate is the sense of appreciation of others and making sure that you're trying your best to see where they are in things. It's not unlike what you were just talking about in terms of when you're conversing with someone whose opinion is otherwise. But it also comes even into your house when you have team members who are working together - they're going to see things differently and have different experiences, and to honor and appreciate their experience, to me, is really, really important and valuable.

One of the biggest pieces I've seen with Melinda's leadership of Nurses for Newborns is her dedication to transparency and communication. So those two things are, I think, really wonderful characteristics of an organization, and they help everybody to be on board with things, and if they're not on board, to give them a chance to say, "wait a minute, we forgot about this anchor hanging out here," you know, whatever it might be. I think those are wonderful, wonderful qualities.

One of the things with Nurses for Newborns: I was privileged to be there that many years, which today is a long time in terms of organizations, and I could see, as we started to grow over time... you appreciate the differing moments that are there, and sometimes it may be that in the early years, like it was with Sharon, that passion drove that organization in a way that was unbelievable, but, at the same time was unattending to certain things that would sustain it. And then, as we grew older, we started realizing that in a way that was more helpful, and we could build some level of sustainability and operations.

Doing that, in terms of an organization, is difficult. That is really difficult. Because you are... it's like with a child, with our own developmental process for humans, you know, there's always those stages... you have to get through it, and it's not easy, and sometimes there's mistakes, just like in every parenting or any other organization process. But to just know that, hey, we're going to stay at it and continue and carry that passion, but do it in a way that's honoring all the players, including those who are saying, "we need to be able to keep paying our bills." You know, that's all part of it.

EMILY:

So, people that are reading this are basically people who are working in the field of child abuse and neglect or that are a part of or really invested in our mission. Did you have any practical tips for people who are working in the field right now? So if you're thinking about just your average home visitor or administrator - what are some tips that you have about how to do the work or even something like time management?

RICH:

That word of time management is huge. For us at Nurses for Newborns, it was a constant. But I'm going to jump ahead of it with another issue that we saw is even more critical, and that is self-care. If there was anything in terms of our school of social work, in terms of what I emphasize in my ethics class, and now what we do throughout the program, and I think in many other professions as well... We're really being more attentive to caring for ourselves in ways that are allowing us to be what we try to teach in terms of the Protective Factors... resilience! You know, you can't have resilience if you don't have an energy source for that next step.

And so for many years, I overdid it, totally as a clinician, as a social worker, as a grant writer - when I work through the night and get a grant out for the next morning, we get the grant, okay, that's good, but in the long run, that's not a healthy way to operate - so, I would say I think that self-care is so important, and allowing yourself the right to be healthy... the right to take care of yourself... doing those things that you find give you a little bit of energy, that give you the space to be you.

So, that I think is the most important piece. Time management can really help that, because if you can parcel your time by saying no to certain things and saying, "this is the priority," and do this in an organized fashion that works for you - every person is different in terms of the way of doing that - that can really help with care of yourself. And then it also ends up that you're doing a better job, too.

EMILY:

Alright. I just have two more questions for you, and I think these are interesting questions. First question is, I want you to think back to when you started at Nurses for Newborns to now... How did you see the field change? How has prevention of child abuse and neglect and our understanding of it changed or evolved? What did you see change from the time you entered to when you retired?

RICH:

That has been one of the wonderful joys of my career - to see the growth of the profession and the fields of knowledge that can be useful to the moms, kids, babies, the families and the ultimate benefit of society. I guess one of the things that's changed, it's funny, but it's so true... Some of the earlier assumptions about prevention that we had more from anecdotal and practice information were borne out with more research. So, I thought that was really a help! As you look at your website or anything else in terms of the communication you share, you can share those things now in ways that they're not just "old wives' tales" or whatever they used to call us. This is based on real information; this can be more useful than you think. So that was one piece.

The explosion of neuroscience... that really, radically changes things. About five years ago, I got to attend a board meeting of one of our partners in the larger community,

(Rich) and a board member of that particular group spoke about "infant mental health," and I almost fell off the chair, because she actually used those words. And I thought, "it's catching on!" I thought that was a really powerful change. The fact that the science is there and then that people start accepting the science and start using it... those are powerful things.

I think the field grew in financial investment. When we started, were it not for the Children's Trust Fund, I don't know if Nurses for Newborns would have been able to continue sailing in those first years as it was. Children's Trust Fund has been such a critical partner to Nurses for Newborns and so many others, but thankfully, others started to see the wisdom of the investment model in early life and then, of course, the financial models and others that validated the efficacy of investment. All of that just kept building that case, and that helped with some of the dollars to come. I know that dollars shift over time, so I'm not saying that's always going to be that way, but that was a change, and it was a helpful change, at least for some time. I think those are, I guess, the biggest things I noticed from the field perspective.

I think the other thing that that struck me is how, and this has been an ebb and tide kind of thing, but when I started with Nurses for Newborns, issues related to the variant disparities of the children that we serve were not as clearly understood and over time, again, science helped to build this case. Now, this challenge for me has been that, as I've seen this grow, this knowledge base grow, I've also seen pushback from people who are devaluing historical and scientific evidence that suggests that - it really indicates this disparity has to do with how we behave in terms of treating each other and have treated each other. So, I think that's kind of a piece that's continuing, and that's a worrisome one. That's the worrisome one I've seen more recently - that instead of embracing the new information and allowing ourselves to grow by that in a way that's helpful, so that all are included, we get into models that we've done over and over again over the centuries, but in a way that's really harmful.

EMILY:

So, my last question for you is really kind of forward thinking. So, as you've sort of retired from the field and seen this transformation and all of these things coming, what do you hope the future looks like for the field of child abuse and neglect prevention?

RICH:

My departure at Nurses for Newborns definitely had to do with me in terms of my age and stage of life. But it also had to do with my appreciation of where Nurses for Newborns was and where some of the field was around it - and that is that I'm hopeful about where we're going with science. I feel like there is a real connectivity with bodies of information that were not available before in terms of pure research, in terms of real biological research, social research, new data sets that are enormous, that you can interconnect fields of information in ways that we just couldn't even think about when I got into the field.

(Rich) When I think about in terms of the kind of work that I had the privilege of being part of - the kind of work that you lead with the Children's Trust Fund - is that we have the chance to start looking at all the range of systems that can interact in ways that could be protective of children, that can be promotive of the best in human experience. So, I'm encouraged by that. I think there's a real chance for us to do things that are great.

The other side of this, though, is that as we grow with this new wonderful technology and science efforts, don't forget we're still human, social creatures, and attending to the heart and the basics of human relationship have to be part of that. If we ignore that, we really ignore a lot of our potential. So, I'm excited about that. Of course, I'm a social worker, so I see this as a real field of expansive knowledge. But when I think about some of our nurses... nurses are all about the same kind of thing - they're about building these holistic relationships that allow a person to be whole. It is... yes the science supports it all... but it's the relationships that allow these to occur.

So, I'm hopeful for that, and I've been blessed... I've been blessed by great, wonderful, kind, gracious relationships. My family at Nurses for Newborns was so wonderful to me in my departure, but they were wonderful to me always. Even when we had our disagreements and problems, there was a care there, and I saw that many other places - certainly the Children's Trust Fund team... it's always been that way for me, for our organization, for so many others. And people within our state offices - I have had the enormous pleasure of working with state - what we call "bureaucrats" - you have these bad titles - who are just dedicated, and they give their souls for the people of our state and for our children. And I think that's what makes things work. And when we listen to that soul that's there, who knows what the possibilities may be?

EMILY:

That was really wonderful, Rich. I appreciate your time. I think this is... it's just something that I'm excited to try to do and to share messages of people that have done great things in our field and to give people hope and to be just a little bit of a message for people, and so I appreciate your time.

RICH:

Thank you, Emily. Thank you very much. Thanks for choosing to do this. You know, you're doing what I was just talking about. You're elevating the relational model by doing it this way, using technology and building on it. So, thank you. Thank you so very much.

EMILY:

Talking to you and hearing from you is a pleasure, Rich. Thank you.

RICH:

Thank you, Emily.