

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

November 10, 1950

Description: In the opening segment, ER awards Adele Rosenwald Levy "The Eleanor Roosevelt Community Service Citation" for her work as president of the Citizens' Committee on Children. In the interview segment, ER discusses Citizens' Committee on Children with Adele Rosenwald Levy and Ruth Pruyn Field.

Participants: ER, Adele Rosenwald Levy, Ruth Pruyn Field

[ER:] You know, Mrs. Levy, we're making it a practice on this program to bring to the attention of our listeners those organizations which are performing a real service in the community. To point out this kind of achievement, we award The Eleanor Roosevelt Community Service Citation to one such organization each week. It is a particular pleasure for me to be able to award this citation to you, Mrs. Levy, as president of the Citizens' Committee on Children. I think we have made it clear in our discussion this afternoon the very important accomplishments this Committee has made in furthering the health, education, and welfare of children in the community. I can only offer my sincerest congratulations.

[Adele Rosenwald Levy:] Mrs. Roosevelt, I'm not only thrilled but very, very surprised. And I do accept this award with the gratitude of the Committee and on behalf of the Committee, and this gives me the opportunity to pay special pri--uh tribute, to our director Charlotte Carr and our program director Mrs. Trude Lash. Without these two very able and dynamic and hardworking women I don't think the Citizens' Committee on Children could exist and I think every member of the Committee would agree to that. Thank you.

(Break 1:37-1:52)

[ER:] I have as my guests today Mrs. David Levy and Mrs. Marshall Field. All three of us are members of an organization known as the Citizens' Committee on Children of New York City. Mrs. Levy has been president of the Committee since its formation five years ago. Of all of the many citizens' groups in which I have been interested, this one has a rather special appeal. Mrs. Levy, I've often heard you say that of all the different organizations with which you are connected, the Citizens' Committee on Children is nearest to your heart. Will you tell us why you feel this way?

[Adele Rosenwald Levy:] I suppose, Mrs. Roosevelt, it's because children are nearest to my heart. And I think the Citizens' Committee on Children has really made an effective contribution to the whole field of child welfare. It has a special character and perhaps it would become clearer if I started by pointing out the sort of people who belong to this Committee. There are lay people, like the three of us, though I don't think it's fair, Mrs. Roosevelt, to the rest of us to call you a lay person.

[ER:] I certainly am in this case!

[Adele Rosenwald Levy:] Well, then there are the lay-citizens, of which you count yourselves—yourself, one. And there're the professional members. We have experts in a great many fields; for instance, Dr. Leona Baumgartner, who is assistant health commissioner of New eh—of New York City. There are judges, like Judge Justine Polier, Judge Hubert Delaney, Jane Bolin, and Judge Edward Weinfeld. We have psychiatrists like Dr. Marion Kenworthy and Viola Bernard, and educators like Roma Gans and Dr. Alice Kelleher. We have housing experts, criminologists, social workers, and community workers. These

are just a few names I picked at random. But all of us together have formed what we might call a permanent team in the service of New York's children. It was our feeling that specialists too often functioned in an isolated way, and the teacher might not know what the physician was doing, and that neither of them were working closely with the other people connected with the--in child care. This, we felt, led to wasted effort, to confusion, and often to duplication of services at a time of critical shortages--shortage of resources. We felt that an integrated and inter-related program for children, you might call it a master plan for children, should be developed into which each service would fit and that a group like ours consisting of professional and lay citizens might be able to work more effectively towards such a program. (4:45)

[ER:] Well, what you really did was to try and coordinate resources, but what I've always wondered was how you got all these specialists who are members of the Committee to come to meetings and to do all the work you've been describing. It's been my experience that such people are very busy indeed and hard to corral.

[Adele Rosenwald Levy:] Well, it has been difficult but we found that it has been possible. First, because our members have found this experiment of working together quite exciting. Especially when they saw that they could actually achieve a good deal in this way. Then they found it profitable as well because for the first time they had an opportunity to work with experts from other fields of child care to learn about their experiences. They've really been quite eloquent in stating that it enabled them to do their own jobs more effectively.

[ER:] Well, I should think that might be so, but then I've always felt that um while you needed the specialists, you needed uh the context that would take you um into the understanding of everyday people to put through a uh an integrated program of this kind because you have to talk to politicians about it and you have to uh make the public understand. Have, have you found that you could get public relations people to work with you under these circumstances and to do work vol--on a voluntary basis? (6:27)

[Adele Rosenwald Levy:] Honestly, Mrs. Roosevelt, I don't think we function that way.

[ER and Adele Rosenwald Levy overlap]

[ER:] You don't try to even?

[Adele Rosenwald Levy:] We don't ev--we really try to publicize too much.

[ER:] Well, now that's a very interesting thing about the Committee, and I-I think that shows that it just means you're interested in doing a job. Now I see that Elliott wants to come in for a minute and then I must talk to Mrs. Field.

(Break 6:52-6:58)

[ER:] Now, Mrs. Field, I know that you and your husband have always been particularly interested in children's services and have helped with the development of a good many new ones. You've been sitting very quiet so far, but I wonder what it was that made you feel that this Committee was so worthwhile that you were willing to join it.

[Ruth Pruyn Field:] I was attracted by the willingness of the Committee to develop new methods of meeting new problems and by the complete concentration on the needs of the children. The question is always: Will this certain action result in the most benefits for children? If it is the opinion of the Committee members that it will and it is undertaken. I've been impressed by the wide range of problems

the Committee has tackled, and at the same time by its ability to center its thinking always on the child and not to get lost in a maze of specialist services. The Citizens' Committee each year analyzes the city budget, the budgets of the various departments that touch the lives of children. By looking at appropriations across the board, the Committee can judge at a glance where there are gaps or duplications and where more funds are needed to make minimum services for children possible. I should like to stress [Ruth Pruyn Field coughs] that the Committee acts fast, it does not go off half-cocked; it insists on a full investigation of a situation before a course of action is decided on. Not long ago, a particular public school in a mental hospital was to be closed and an appeal came to the Committee to help keep it open. Though a full report had been written about the school, members of the Committee and the staff went to look at it and studied it very thoroughly. Only then did they decide to support it, and were of course able to do so with real conviction, current knowledge and therefore increased strength. It's my guess the school won't be closed. (9:00)

[ER:] Now that is-is really satisfactory because it shows it--you're a very thorough uh working Committee. Mrs. Levy, what do you think is the most important thing the Committee has been able to do for children?

[Adele Rosenwald Levy:] That's hard to say, Mrs. Roosevelt. I wouldn't like to say that one thing was more important than the other, but I do think the very fact that we exist is important. I think that we've demonstrated that this kind of a team, this multi-discipline approach I think they call it, can successfully work out. And that this experiment, if it can work in New York, can be undertaken in other communities as well. Actually we get a great many requests for information on what the Committee is, what it does, and how it works. I think too that the Committee has made the community as a whole more aware of children's needs. Our members have spoken, oh, at a numerable parent's meetings, before teachers, and other professional groups, and over the radio. We've published reports and studies.

[ER:] And I'm-I'm interested in those reports. Um can you tell me um uh a little bit about them, what kind of studies are they?

[Adele Rosenwald Levy:] Well, I can cite one or two. The Committee divide--has divided itself into different working sections on health, welfare, foster care, mental health, and so on. The section on education, for example, prepared a pamphlet called "Citizens Look at their Schools." It was a simple question and answer affair for parents who were worried about the inadequate school services but did not know what they could do to make better schools. I remember that Dr. Jansen came to the press conference at which the study was announced. We were awfully proud because it was his first public appearance after he became superintendent of schools. And I might say that some of the improvements and some of the changes that we advocated at that time are in effect now. We also have published a comparable pamphlet in the field of health called "Citizens look at their Health Services for Children." That dealt with such needs as the need for additional child health stations, the need for more nurses, higher nurses' salaries, more school health services, and so on. I don't think we have made nearly as big a dent in this field as we have in some of the others.

[ER:] Well I think that uh is covering a very wide field, and now I see that Elliott wants to come in again.

(Break 11:59-12:09)

[ER:] Well, it seems to me that there are a good many groups that publish pamphlets and reports and surveys and studies. There must um be some way, Mrs. Field, in which the Citizens' Committee is different from these other groups. Could you tell me just how?

[Ruth Pruyn Field:] There is a very essential difference. The Citizens' Committee considers its studies only as tools for action. Therefore publication is but the first step and not the final result. We judge success not by asking how many copies of the study we distributed, but by asking how many recommendations were carried through. We're glad that both the reports that we mentioned are out of date. Last year we published another rather ambitious report, "Children Absent from School." A study of truancy which is not only a survey of the Bureau of Attendance, the agency in the school system which deals with truance, but outlines at the same time a program for possible school services for children in trouble. The effects of that study have been good. Many of our recommendations were accepted by the leaders of the schools, and we're now working hard to get others accepted as well. These publications and what we might call the consequences of these publications are of course only one aspect of the Committee's work.

[ER:] What do you mean by that? If they're only one aspect, what are the other aspects? (13:36)

[Ruth Pruyn Field:] Quite often the Committee works without publicity. Often in cooperation with other groups or with officials of public agencies to affect improvements in children's services and will publicly expose shortcomings only as a last resort. Some time ago, a good deal of evidence was collected against a public official, and though it was never published, after a bit he just wasn't there any longer. However, when publicity is necessary, the Committee can and does act very quickly.

[ER:] Well, I'm very much interested to hear [ER coughs] that you feel that working with public officials is, in most cases, a successful thing to do, but as we discuss the Committee's work here, it all sounds as though the Committee always reached its aims. That unfortunately is not true, I'm afraid. Is it, Mrs. Levy?

[Adele Rosenwald Levy:] I'm afraid it isn't, Mrs. Roosevelt, I wish it were. We have a good many defeats; oh I won't say defeats because we won't let ourselves be defeated easily but we do have many discouragements. And sometimes even the things that we think are progressing and know are progressing, progress much too slowly to satisfy us. (15:02)

[ER:] Well, I think you've described a good deal of work, can you tell me some more even?

[Adele Rosenwald Levy:] Well, I'd like to tell you about one of the interesting things because I happen to um just yesterday, talk to Ms. Amelia Igel, the Director of the Bureau of Child Welfare of the Welfare Department, and she brought me up to date as to what was happening to well babies who were in hospitals. That's one of our successes and one of our discouragements, that program. It was the first thing I think the Committee ever undertook, a newspaper campaign concerning the well babies in hospital wards. We disclosed that one to two hundred perfectly healthy babies were left in hospital wards for months and sometimes for years. The hospitals were understaffed and, of course, couldn't give the children the care they needed and so often the poor little things were even strapped to their beds. Not because the people in the hospitals wanted to be cruel but because they didn't know how to take care of them properly. They didn't have time to take care of them properly, rather. People were very much upset about the stories of individual babies, and they'll probably be horrified to hear that the num--while the number has decreased, there are still a good many of these babies for whom no other homes can be found but hospital wards. Sounds terrible, doesn't it? However, Ms. Igel did tell me that the number of well babies in hospitals had gone down from one hundred and fifty to sixty-five, then they were as low as forty during the summer, and that the length of stay had really improved. The babies are there now for two or three months at the most.

[ER:] What you really need is a publicity campaign to increase the acceptance of babies into homes, but now I see that Elliott wants to come in again.

(Break 17:13-17:23)

[ER:] Mrs. Levy, before we leave this question of finding homes for babies, have you had any success?

[Adele Rosenwald Levy:] We have indeed, Mrs. Roosevelt. Actually the Department of Welfare has started its own foster home program, and Ms. Igel told me just yesterday that they have placed approximately one hundred and eleven babies under two years of age. It isn't nearly enough, but it is a good beginning.

[ER:] Well, I think that is wonderful. But you've been describing work for the children of New York City and of course that's what the Committee's name implies. But I remember that some time ago I was present at an annual meeting of the Committee and we discussed the kind of legislation we should like to see passed, both on the state and the national level. Is the Committee active in that field at all, or was that simply a discussion to inform its members? Perhaps you could tell me, Mrs. Field.

[Ruth Pruyn Field:] The Committee works directly only for the children of New York City, but as you know many issues affecting these children are settled on the state and federal level, so we have a very active legislative section. We are not, of course, a pressure group for legislation. But we've done a good deal of educational work in that field. We're very active in a campaign against the sale of babies. So often we've been handicapped by the lack of laws for the protection of children, or by the effects of undesirable laws that we cooperated in establishing a state-wide organization which is concerned solely with legislative matters.

[ER:] That's interesting, and I should think most useful. Mrs. Levy, I don't suppose you really call this a political organization, would you?

[Adele Rosenwald Levy:] No, it really isn't, Mrs. Roosevelt, it's a Citizens' Committee, as the name implies. And we're non-partisan, but we have found it useful to have as many members close friends of the city administration and the state government as possible. It helps us in many instances in solving the problems that come up from day to day in connection with city or state services for children. (19:37)

[ER:] In other words, what you're saying is that um one has to have uh some connection with one's government to get some of these things done. And you--I'd just like to ask um you, Mrs. Field, what are some of the concrete problems, for instance, that the Committee will have to face during the next few months?

[Ruth Pruyn Field:] We will have to work toward better nurses' salaries otherwise our school health services will deteriorate still further. We shall have to watch that a qualified person is appointed for the very highly paid position of Director of the Bureau of Attendance in the school system. We have to watch that the school I described before is not closed. Those are just a few of the immediate problems. (20:24)

[ER:] Well, I think you've got a good many to face [ER laughs] and Mrs. Levy you uh mentioned in the early part of your talk that, um, you were beginning city planning in terms of children. Perhaps now that we have presented the work of the Committee we could come back to that. Could you [ER coughs] give us a little more detail on planning?

[Adele Rosenwald Levy:] Well, it's not really well developed yet, Mrs. Roosevelt, but we have always stressed that we would like to see that much talked up master plan of New York City, a plan in terms of people rather than of buildings. And our particular concern is, of course, that part of the plan that affects children. We'll--we're willing to start very modestly. You know that at this moment, it's impossible to combine the information about children which different city departments and private agencies have

because their methods of collecting statistics differ and the districts in which they um operate differ. A police district has no relation to a health or a school district. We would like as a beginning to work toward an organization in this city where by every single thing that is known about children could be pooled in one place. That, in itself, would prevent a great deal of waste and overlapping and make everything we do for children more effective. (22:00)

[ER:] Well, of course, what you are really wanting is an ideal organization and that's extremely difficult ever to get. But I think if any group can get it, you probably can do it. Now I want to thank both you Mrs. Levy and you Mrs. Field for being with me today. I think a discussion such as this always gives us a clearer picture of- of very important kind of activity. Now we must go on to another part of the program.

(22:37)

Transcribed from holdings at Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (FDRL)
File(s): 72-30(20)

Transcription: Katie Woods
First Edit: Andreas Meyris
Final Edit: Seth LaShier
Final Check: Hannah Schrantz

The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project