Interview

The Story of Ferris Urbanowski: California, Here We Come!

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Abstract

Although childbirth educators may not all have known her by name, the lovely redhead who was the star childbirth educator in the 1970s film *The Story of Eric* was a familiar face. After viewing the film numerous times in our classes, early childbirth educators all felt that we knew her. Ferris Urbanowski was an early crusader for the Lamaze method of childbirth preparation in California in the 1960s. She worked to convince physicians in the Los Angeles area of the merits of the method, to establish classes for expectant parents, and to start a chapter of ASPO (now, Lamaze International, Inc.) in Los Angeles. Her book about yoga illustrated how additional methods of relaxation could benefit pregnant women. Today, Urbanowski attributes her past involvement in childbirth education to her current professional role as a teacher and counselor in the field of stress reduction at the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center.

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Elaine Zwelling: You were one of the early leaders in childbirth education in California. How did you first become involved? Had you always wanted to be a childbirth educator?

Ferris Urbanowski: In April of 1964, my husband and I joined one of Elisabeth Bing's classes, held in her apartment on 79th Street in New York City, to prepare for the birth of our first child. How sweet and nostalgic it is for me to visit her today in that familiar place. My

daughter Alexandra's birth on June 4, 1964, at New York Hospital, with my husband and Dr. Myron Buchman officiating, was one of the high points of my life. I remember going on the hospital tour and being in the elevator with several other couples. One woman asked me, "Oh, are you trained?" I felt like some sort of Olympic athlete! During my labor, one of the nurses said to me, "Oh, hurry up! I want to go to the delivery room with you!" She was next in line to go to the delivery room; the woman in the room next to me and I were pacing each other and my next-door neighbor had obviously not had the benefits of the Lamaze course. In those days, we were pioneers. I will be forever grateful for Elisabeth's course and for the support of Dr. Buchman. I didn't even have an episiotomy, which was really rare at that time.

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In 1966, I was pregnant again. Late in my pregnancy, my husband received a terrific promotion that involved our moving to Los Angeles. In the eighth month of my pregnancy, living in a hotel while we found a house, I began looking for a doctor. Much to my surprise, Lamaze was nearly unknown. There was one woman, Pat Hedrick, teaching out in Simi Valley—a long way from central Los Angeles. I had many frustrating interviews with physicians, with such comments as "Any man who wants to be in the delivery room must be queer or weird." (Both of these statements were actually verbalized). Hospitals would say, "Family-centered maternity care . . . ? Fathers in the delivery room? Never!" It was very discouraging and I was in tears more than once. Although there were two wonderful physicians doing Lamaze at the time (Drs. Kenneth Morgan and Morgan Morgan at the Hospital of the Good Samaritan), I did not hook up with them. I don't remember, but I think they may not yet have been able to invite fathers into the delivery room. I did find a doctor "out in the valley" doing the Bradley method. Marge Hathaway, a Bradley enthusiast, taught classes for him. I went to the classes, which were not quite my style, and I made my peace with it all as

best I could. My daughter Tasha's birth on September 24, 1966, was happily uneventful from a medical perspective. She was actually born in the labor bed as I was being hastily pushed to the delivery room. Those were the days before the sanity of the birthing room. Tasha and I spent the first night of her life curled up in bed together with her nursing at will. One of the "Bradley things" was walking from the delivery room. There is a photo of me holding Tasha and standing in the delivery room with my husband Frank, who is in a surgical gown smoking a cigarette. It was a different time!

After my frustrating experience trying to find sympathetic doctors and hospitals, I was determined that Lamaze would come to Los Angeles. I passionately felt that any woman who wanted Lamaze preparation should be able to have it. I returned to New York where Elisabeth trained me to teach. As a result, we became lifelong friends and collaborated on a number of projects. We did a 45-RPM record, called "Practice for Childbirth" (Urbanowski, 1969). I also did a set of records, "The Lamaze Experience" (Urbanowski, 1972), and much later a book, *Yoga for New Parents* (Urbanowski, 1975). Elisabeth came to Los Angeles a number of times to speak and to do appearances in the interest of "spreading the word." We were able to get a lot of newspaper and television publicity about prepared childbirth.

After I returned to Los Angeles and began teaching, Pat Hedrick and I formed the Lamaze Los Angeles Chapter of ASPO (now, Lamaze International, Inc.). We were soon joined by a no-nonsense physical therapist from New Zealand, Margaret Hoessly. Margaret's husband, who was Swiss by birth, was a neurosurgeon at the Los Angeles Veterans Hospital. We were a determined trio. We worked hard, we didn't give the medical establishment any peace, and our classes grew and grew. Within a couple of years we had obtained some additional hospital support and had enlisted a few other physicians, most notably Irwin Frankel, who was a great enthusiast and is the physician in the film *The Story of Eric* (Seltzer,

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Alexandra Urbanowski (age 6—one of Elisabeth Bing’s “Lamaze babies”), Elisabeth Bing, and Ferris Urbanowski in Los Angeles, CA, in March 1971. Elisabeth was visiting from New York to appear in a television spot and at functions on behalf of Lamaze and the Los Angeles Chapter of Lamaze.

circa 1970/71). A second generation of teachers was coming along, including Sandra Steffes, Femmy de Lyser, and other pioneers. It was sweet to have some of the hospitals who had said “Never!” to family-centered care ask us how to set up such a program. As is still true today—the purse talks! Physicians did not want to lose patients. I always considered an important part of my role as a childbirth educator to be an educator of medical consumers. They were the customers! Once expectant parents started to realize that, they began to demand what they wanted for their birth experience and to go elsewhere if it wasn’t being offered. It was a different climate from today’s HMOs and prepaid health plans, and consumers had the power they should have.

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Zwelling: How many childbirth classes did you teach each week? How much of your time was taken up by your career as a childbirth educator (i.e., part-time or full-time)? Was this your total career focus or were you working at another job as well?

Urbanowski: I would say that my career at that time was being a wife and mother, rather than saying I had a career as a childbirth educator (which ended up happening as time went on). Eventually, I taught as many classes as there were students. I remember at one time that I was teaching four classes a week. I had a mission to make Lamaze preparation for both childbirth and family-centered maternity care available to all who wanted it. It was new territory. I, along with others of the Los Angeles ASPO group, spent a good deal of time giving talks and doing film showings, both to the public and to hospital obstetric staff and administrators. We were dedicated to “getting the word out.” We did presentations, mailings, and anything that would bring Lamaze and family-centered maternity care into the public and professional awareness. All our children learned to stuff and lick envelopes at early ages. The Los Angeles Chapter of ASPO, which included the teachers and an initially small group of physicians and parents, became a very tight group that expanded over time. It was a dedicated group with lots of enthusiasm and energy. People really gave it their all. And we had fun with one another!

Zwelling: Where did you teach your classes in Los Angeles? Were you independent, teaching in your home, or did you teach for a hospital? How were the classes advertised?

Urbanowski: I taught some in hospital settings, but mostly I taught out of my living room and in the nursery school my children attended. That was where the classes for the childbirth film, *The Story of Eric*, were filmed—in Crestwood Hills Nursery School in Brentwood. Adver-

tising for classes was done primarily through physician referrals and through word-of-mouth from new parents to expectant parents. We had a small group of physicians who really believed in Lamaze and a lot more who gave it lip service or who felt it helped their patients cope better even when receiving traditional care. At that time, traditional care usually meant Demerol, sometimes a paracervical that was new at the time, a spinal block, or sometimes even a general anesthetic. What ended up happening was that many of the patients who attended classes did not request or even refused medication and, as time went on, more physicians referred to the classes. Because of our efforts to meet the physicians, they gradually discovered that we were not fanatics and that we were intelligent and personable. That was very helpful!

I don't remember doing formal advertising beyond notices in doctor's offices. I think every expectant parent who took the childbirth course referred at least three other people, so women and their partners started demanding the course, which then involved more physicians. Within three years, the demand increased enormously. Fortunately, we also had some new teachers to meet this demand.

Zwelling: You have mentioned the challenges of working to get fathers into delivery rooms and family-centered maternity care into hospitals. Were there any other goals that you and your fellow childbirth educators tried to achieve in the early 1970s?

Urbanowski: Following our early beginnings and initial challenges—getting fathers in the delivery room and family-centered maternity care—our next big push was to begin teacher training and to work with the ASPO national office to establish teacher certification in Los Angeles. We needed teachers, and people were interested in teaching. By the time we began to look at what might be involved in training, Sandra Steffes and Femmy de Lyser were also involved as teachers. We spent a great deal of time developing a teacher training program and a teacher exam. In time, I began traveling around the country doing teacher-training seminars with teachers from other chapters in other states.

Zwelling: You mentioned the film *The Story of Eric*, and I'm sure many of the childbirth educators reading this article will remember you as the lovely, redheaded child-

birth educator in our first “real” childbirth education film. How did the opportunity come about to participate in that film project?

Urbanowski: One of the most wonderful things about *The Story of Eric* is that it was a completely volunteer effort. An asset of being in Los Angeles is that it is the film capital of the world. I had many movie people in my classes and was always lamenting that we didn't have an up-to-date film. (We were showing a French film, with Dr. Pierre Vellay and Mme. Blanche Cohen, which was wonderful and very charming—but the plant in the delivery room was a big subject of discussion! It truly was a French film.*) The New York City Chapter of ASPO had been collecting money and trying to get a film project going for quite a long time, but nothing seemed to actually be happening. Then one day, we received an anonymous donation (I believe it was for \$5,000) with a note saying, “Do something about ‘the film’.” A young producer, David Seltzer, and his wife, Alice, were in my class at that time and we became friends. As we discussed the dilemma of ‘the film’—rather, the lack thereof—David said, “I'm between projects right now. I'll call in all the favors I'm owed in the business and I'll do it.” It was an incredibly generous offer and did he come through! It was a huge job and he produced, wrote, and directed it all—and he did call in all the favors he was owed! I am still awed and profoundly grateful to all the L.A. Lamaze Chapter members who worked and raised money for direct expenses (such as film); to David; to all the cameramen and sound technicians; and to Harry Neilson, composer, musician, and Lamaze parent, who wrote the music for the film. No one was paid! The spirit, excitement, and generosity were not something usually associated with Hollywood. The New York City Chapter was not so happy however, for they wanted control over the film, the script—all of the project. We had quite a row over it; however, as time was of the essence due to David's schedule, we went ahead with the film. I think the result speaks for itself.

* The “French film” referred to here is *Naissance* (circa late 1950s), Dr. Pierre Vellay's film about birth, using the psychoprophylactic method. Dr. Vellay practiced in Paris and was Dr. Fernand Lamaze's assistant. For more information about Mme. Blanche Cohen, Dr. Lamaze's monitrice, see Elaine Zwelling's article, “Looking Back in Time: An Interview with Madame Blanche Cohen,” in the 1999, Vol. 8/No. 4 issue of this journal.

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Our conflict with the national ASPO office ended up becoming a nationwide issue, with the final result being redefining the roles of the chapters in relation to the national ASPO organization.

There were other challenges as well. For example, there was the question of the featured couple for the film. Since it was a “right now” project, I approached the people in my current class. After it was all discussed, Wendy and Rich Johnson were most willing and seemed as if they would make good subjects. They were the last in the class to give birth and we had no backup. It was obviously a “meant-to-be!” One of the cameramen later said that he had agreed to do the film, believing he would never marry and have children and, therefore, wanted to be present at a birth. He was so overwhelmed by the experience that, after the birth, he kept following Wendy’s gurney down the hall, kissing her and telling her, “I love you, I love you!” The head nurse, Jenny Fellato, a wonderful woman who supported Lamaze childbirth through the years, was a bit taken aback at his reaction!

After the film was “in the can,” we had no editor. The project came to a stop. Several months later, I happened to ask the husband of one of my students what he did for a living. He replied, “I’m a film editor.” His fate was sealed! John Farrell spent six weeks in the editing room, creating the finished *The Story of Eric*. With the film completed, the Lamaze Chapter of Los Angeles—physicians, parents, and teachers—threw ourselves a huge screening and formal dress party. One of the physicians, James McNulty, was married to the then well-known actress, Ann Blythe. She was our mistress of ceremonies for the event. Congratulations flowed to all. For me, the best thing about the film was that every part of it was a gift, given from love, from appreciation for Lamaze childbirth, from a sense of community, and from the fun of working together to make it happen. I am forever grateful to all who made it happen!

Zwelling: Was the film viewed in a positive light at the time? Do you think it made a positive impact on the acceptance of prepared childbirth?

Urbanowski: It was, and I do think it made a positive impact. I think it’s a beautiful, happy film. There are a couple of lines of dialogue that bother me. The listing of class members speaks of “lawyers, architects, etc.”—something like that. In any case, all professional people, which I feel is unfortunate. The parents in class are called by their last names, but we really did do that back then! The film also has Wendy and Rich saying, “Like most couples, we wanted our first child to be a boy.” It was true for them, but I was unhappy about the generalization. The film is certainly out-of-date for today, but I feel it has served its purpose for a long time.

I am continually amazed by the power of the media. I can’t tell you how many times people recognized me from the film. In 1972 we moved to Pennsylvania. One day, I asked the customer service person in the produce department at my supermarket a question and he replied, “You’re in a film! My wife and I saw it last week in our childbirth class!” That kind of thing happened a lot—for a long time—and well after I thought my 1970 self and my present self looked quite different. My second husband, whom I met in 1983, recognized me from the film. He and his first wife had seen it in their Lamaze class. Amazing! People still ask me about *Eric*, so I would say the film has had a big effect!

Zwelling: After you moved to Pennsylvania, did you continue to teach childbirth classes? What was your involvement with ASPO at that point?

Urbanowski: I did continue to teach childbirth classes, working with a physician who was active in ASPO and had been a proponent of Lamaze for a long time. His name was Dr. Gerald Barard. He was also a great horticulturist and had magnificent green houses filled with orchids. He was at Hunterdon Medical Center in Flemington, New Jersey, and had implemented family-centered maternity care at that center. I taught at the hospital. The photos in my book *Yoga for New Parents* (Urbanowski, 1975) were all of people who took the classes in Pennsylvania or New Jersey and gave birth at Hunterdon. The glamorous couple on both the cover and the back of the book, Boz and Rusty Swope, lived

near me in Bucks County, Pennsylvania—just across the river from Flemington. It was lovely working in such a supportive environment.

Zwelling: Tell us about your life today. What are you doing professionally? Do you think your experience as a childbirth educator has influenced your career development in any way?

Urbanowski: Yes, I do think my life as a childbirth educator has influenced my professional path. When I was in California, I had begun taking yoga classes. With the move to Pennsylvania, I met Balaram, a yoga teacher trained by Swami Satchidananda who was living in New Hope, Pennsylvania. I began studying yoga intensively and Balaram assisted me with *Yoga for New Parents* (Urbanowski, 1975). In 1975, my husband, Frank, be-

Ferris Buck Urbanowski, MA, in her office at the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society, located at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester, MA. Ferris is currently a senior instructor and member of the professional training staff at the center.

came director of the MIT Press at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a position he still holds. We, along with Balaram and several of his students, moved to southern New Hampshire where we lived in what one of the residents describes as an “upper-middle-class commune/ashram.” There was a swimming pool and our children had their horses. It was a wild time—very post ’60s. Shortly after the move, I began studying with Zen Master Seung Sahn in Cambridge and became a serious student of meditation. “Relax, focus, breathe”—something I learned as a Lamaze student and taught to all my students turned out to have very far-reaching applications. At my first retreat at Master Seung Sahn’s Cambridge Zen Center, I met Jon Kabat-Zinn, who was to become a friend and major influence in my life.

My path since 1975 led me to a master’s degree in counseling psychology from Antioch New England, where I was a faculty member from 1983–1994 and developed a holistic counseling curriculum, including such courses as “Mind/Body Psychology” and “Mindfulness Psychotherapy,” and where I also taught in the environmental studies department teaching “Mindfulness in Nature.” From 1980–1994, I taught “Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction” (the program developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn) and had a private psychotherapy practice in Peterborough, New Hampshire.

In 1992, Jon convinced me to come to the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. It was a time of great expansion for the clinic. In 1990, Jon’s book *Full Catastrophe Living* was published, and the clinic was featured in the Bill Moyer’s 1993 public television series, “Healing and the Mind.” Shortly thereafter, the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society was created to be an umbrella for the expanded work of the clinic. I began teaching in the clinic in 1992 and also became the administrator of the clinic professional training programs, a position I held until 1999. I am currently a senior teacher and member of the professional training staff at the Center for Mindfulness. I teach in the clinic, in corporations, and at the law firm of Hale and Dorr. In addition, I lecture and give workshops and presentations, nationally and internationally. A big thrill was teaching for a month in Wales in 1999, and I’m going to get to go back in 2001. Another enormous thrill was speaking at the 40th annual meeting of the New York Chapter of Lamaze International where Elisabeth Bing was so movingly and

appropriately honored. What a great lady! How many of us she has influenced. What a wonderful journey this has been!

My second husband, Ned Kelley, and I have built a house near my parents in Vermont. My parents are healthy, but nothing is forever. We feel very lucky to have them and want to be close as they age. My first husband, Frank Urbanowski, and his wife, Julia, live an hour away near Middlebury, Vermont. He commutes to the MIT Press in Cambridge. I commute to the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester, Massachusetts. Our "Lamaze babies," Alexandra (age 36) and Tasha (age 34), are doing well. Alexandra is managing director of the San Jose Repertory Theater in San Jose, California. Tasha is a teacher and advisor at the Dwight Englewood School in Englewood, New Jersey. We're

waiting for Lamaze grandchildren! Tasha tells Elisabeth Bing, "You have to keep teaching until I have my first baby!"

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Researchers Discuss Evidence on Managing Mild Chronic Hypertension during Pregnancy

Even mild chronic hypertension during pregnancy triples the risk of perinatal death, doubles the risk for placental abruption, and increases the risk of impaired fetal growth and death, according to a review of scientific evidence on the subject. There is consensus that intensive monitoring and antihypertensive treatment are warranted for pregnant women with severe hypertension (blood pressure of 160/110 mm Hg or higher), but uncertainty exists about management of those who have mild chronic hypertension.

Antihypertensive agents are used in pregnancies complicated by mild chronic hypertension despite unclear tradeoffs between potential benefits and harms. Even the use of aspirin is controversial, says Cynthia D. Mulrow, MD, MSc, of the San Antonio Evidence-based Practice Center (EPC) at the University of Texas Health Sciences Center. The EPC is supported by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (contract 290-97-0012).

Dr. Mulrow and colleagues reviewed 215 articles on management of mild chronic hypertension during pregnancy. They found that no one agent significantly reduced perinatal mortality. However, there was clear evidence that angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors were harmful to second- and third-trimester fetuses and are best avoided. Evidence on the risks for fetal growth impairment with beta-blockers and alpha/beta blockers was conflicting. The best evidence suggested that atenolol given early in pregnancy was associated with fetal growth retardation.

Trials showed that aspirin neither reduced nor increased perinatal and maternal morbidity, but they did not rule out possible small-to-moderate beneficial or adverse effects. No studies provided guidance on the benefits or consequences of various nonpharmacologic therapies or monitoring strategies, such as serial ultrasonography to measure fetal growth, nonstress testing, biophysical profiles, and doppler flow velocity measurements that are designed to detect the complications of chronic hypertension.

See "Management of mild chronic hypertension during pregnancy: A review," by Robert L. Ferrer, MD, MPH, Baha M. Sibai, MD, Dr. Mulrow, and others in the November 2000 *Obstetrics & Gynecology* 96(5), pp. 849-860. **Note:** This journal article is based on Evidence Report/Technology Assessment No. 14, "Management of Chronic Hypertension during Pregnancy," prepared for the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) by the San Antonio EPC. A summary of the report (AHRQ Publication No. 00-E010) and the full report (AHRQ Publication No. 00-E011) are available from AHRQ (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2101 East Jefferson Street, Rockville, MD 20852; web site, www.ahrq.gov).

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