

Mel Pipe: In the Service of Children



What's Margaret-Ellen Pipe doing halfway around the world from home? She might have as much wanderlust as the next Kiwi, but this fall she settled into her James Hall research lab—focused, as always, on children's memories of traumatic experiences. A developmental psychologist from New Zealand, Mel, as she is known to friends and colleagues, is delighted with her role in the Children's Studies Program and Center, which is every bit as interdisciplinary as she is. Pipe comes to Brooklyn College on an unusual targeted cluster line for policy, welfare, and the rights of children, awarded to the Children's Studies Program and Center by the Office of the Executive Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs of CUNY.

A fellow of the Association of Psychological Science, Pipe publishes prodigiously, sits on editorial boards of distinguished journals, and is primary investigator in several large studies. She hopes her recent \$175,000 National Institute of Justice grant will be the first of many at Brooklyn College. It will bring longtime collaborator Yael Orbach—coeditor of their forthcoming book, *Child Sexual*

Abuse: Disclosure, Delay and Denial (Lawrence Erlbaum, March 2007)—to Brooklyn College as a senior researcher as well as afford students valuable research experience.

Pipe and her associates will assay which interview techniques work best with children, be they victims of abuse seen in forensic contexts, patients being prepared for a painful medical procedure, or underserved youth. She hopes to “enhance children's welfare” in the process. “It's not just what you ask,” she cautions, “it is how you ask it and in what context.”

When Pipe earned her doctorate from the University of Auckland, New Zealand, work on children's traumatic memories was just taking flight. The 1983–1990 *McMartin* preschool court case, in which eight adults were charged with 208 counts of child abuse, launched research in earnest. The trial cost the state of California more than \$16 million, returned no convictions, and “influenced everybody in the field.”

“How do you interview children of a wide range of ages and abilities about something upsetting and shameful that they may feel responsible for, without leading or contaminating the evidence?” Pipe asks, adding that she is often inspired “by the gaps, by hearing people say things, and asking ‘Is that right?’” On a U.K. sabbatical, she listened to barristers debate the ability of children to bear witness. “That convinced me that there was a role for psychologists,” she says. She has since often worked with enforcement, legal, and judicial officials.

That said, why is Pipe so far from home? Truth be told, she immigrated to the States to marry a John Jay College and Harvard Law School graduate, Byron Burnett, Esq., who hailed from Crown Heights, sadly, now deceased. Having worked previously at the National Institutes of Health in Washington, D.C., Pipe arrived at Brooklyn College feeling connected to the neighborhood through memories of her husband's stories. She loves New York's diversity, culture, and “high level of activity and engagement.”

Although Pipe visits family in New Zealand at least once a year, we can count on her sticking around. Her ties to Brooklyn resonate with good times past and those yet to come.