



A PERSONAL TRIBUTE TO JUDITH WALLERSTEIN

Page 1 of 4

By Linda Ranson Jacobs

06/29/2012

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR: In the area of children of divorce, there are few people who have been as influential as Judith Wallerstein. Her groundbreaking study and work has paved the way for those of us who work with children of divorce. Ms. Wallerstein passed away last week at the age of 90. Though she is now gone, her work and her influence will live on – hopefully sparking others to carry the mantle for children of divorce. One of our regular contributors - Linda Ranson Jacobs - was fortunate enough to interact with Ms. Wallerstein when she was developing the Divorce Care 4 Kids program. In this article she recounts those interactions and reflects on the contribution and legacy of Ms. Wallerstein.

The Work and Influence of Judith Wallerstein



Through her research, reporting and personal understanding and care, Judith Wallerstein probably changed the face of the child of divorce more than anyone in this generation. As many of you know, she began talking to and following 131 children whose parents were all going through a divorce. From her research and communication with those 131 children she wrote three important books.

After the first five years she wrote, [“Surviving The Breakup: How Children And Parents Cope With Divorce”](#). [“Second Chances: Men, Women and Children a Decade After Divorce”](#) came after fifteen years and [“The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study”](#) came after her study with the original 131 children after twenty-five years. After those books she compiled all of her information from her research and wrote what was to me the most dynamic book of all, “What About the Kids?”

A Poorly Timed Phone Call

When I was developing DC4K (DivorceCare for Kids), I had the privilege of talking to her on the phone. I had wanted to visit with her, but I had been hesitating calling such an important person. My boss at Church Initiative, Steve Grissom, encouraged me to go ahead and give her a call. So, during my research phase in 2002, I finally worked up the nerve to do just that. I had read her books, and I wanted to find out what else I needed to know to develop DC4K and make it an effective program.

I remember I was so nervous dialing her number. Her son answered the phone, and he was very short with me. I asked to speak with Judith Wallerstein. I’m sure my voice was shaky as I said her name. And that’s when I realized my big blunder...it was only seven o’clock on the West coast. YIKES! In my excitement, I had neglected to realize I was in the Eastern Standard time zone and there was a three-hour difference. I apologized profusely



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Page 2 of 4

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and offered to call back later in the day. Evidently by this time Judith had come into the room and asked what was going on. After a brief discussion between her son and her, she came to the phone.

Our First Conversation

What a charming and personable woman she was. I'm sure she probably got dozens of calls from people studying the child of divorce, but probably not at 7:00 in the morning. She was an encourager though and made me promise when I got our program developed I would send her the materials. At that time, she also told me about another book she was writing called "What About the Kids?: Raising Your Children Before, During, and After Divorce" and made me promise to read it as soon as it came out. After that call, and after I got DC4K developed we exchanged emails several times.

The E-mail exchange

I would like to include excerpts from some of those emails so that you can see firsthand the personable side of this amazing woman.

Dear Linda,

I loved what you are doing and am very impressed with what you report. Have you thought of writing your work up for one of the professional magazines like Family Relations or Family Court Review. You would reach much wider audience. I have not received the materials that you plan to send. Do you have my address right?

Congratulations,

Judith Wallerstein

I wrote back explaining that DC4K was going to be used in churches and that we had no intention of expanding the audience that would have access to DC4K. She also told me about another study she was doing with siblings and stepsiblings.

I have extended my work and am including issues re siblings and also remarriage. My new article will appear in July in major Journals and will send you copy then if you can remember to remind me. The major findings are serious. Stepparents have a major influence on the people they marry either men or women and many have no sense that it is morally very important to treat all the siblings alike in terms of interest, affection or college education.

A PERSONAL TRIBUTE TO JUDITH WALLERSTEIN

Page 3 of 4

By Linda Ranson Jacobs

06/29/2012

Also 80% of divorced men remarry and the majority of divorced women depending on their age etc. So get in touch with me and I will send it.

Warm regards,

Judy Wallerstein

Keep me in the loop. You are changing the lives of many children. The Churches should develop programs for second marriages. One half of all marriages involve a second marriage for one or both people. Also a lot of research shows that parents prefer their own children to stepchildren. What a pity.

You can imagine how blessed and excited I felt because THE Judith Wallerstein, who was now signing her emails with "Judy," was continuing to encourage me. Now that I look back on all of this I realize that the Lord allowed me to find favor with her. From my side I got to witness to her about how I think true healing for children of divorce comes from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Dear Linda,

I am sending copy. Published this month in Psychoanalytic psych which is official Journal of the American Psychological Association. I loved the materials that you sent and would urge you to write article for Family Relations. You can find it on the Internet. But you would need evaluation of successes and failures.

Regards,

Judy

Every so often I would forward Judith something from the DC4K Leader's Forum so she could see how DC4K was impacting lives. Sometimes she would respond. One email was about a 14 year-old teen, and here is how she responded:

Very moving. Happens a lot that siblings are in many families especially after divorce. May look better than it is. Leader needs to remember that young teenagers are often overused by needy parents and need a chance to complain without guilt. "I paid for my folk's divorce" is frequent lament.

Regards,

Judy Wallerstein



A PERSONAL TRIBUTE TO JUDITH WALLERSTEIN

Page 4 of 4

By Linda Ranson Jacobs

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The world has lost an important advocate for the child of divorce. Her research still stands today as important work. There have been other studies done, and other reports published, about how kids are resilient and how there can be “happy divorces”, etc. But those of use that work with these kids on a day-to-day basis and who work in our churches know that there are no happy divorces for the kids. Kids are resilient when there is a support system that surrounds them. We know that support system can include the church family.

I will miss Judith Wallerstein. I will treasure the personal interaction and the emails from her. I will gingerly care for her books and the report she sent me on stepsiblings. I will continue to recommend her [“What About the Kids?”](#) to divorcing parents and church leaders who want to understand How divorce affects children at different ages. I will attempt to carry on her legacy of truly understanding the child of divorce.

I have tried to show you that divorce has the power to transform your life, for better or worse. It's not a time-limited crisis, as some people still like to argue, but an ongoing changing of shifting family relationships and changed expectations that you and your children will deal with well into their adulthood....Judith Wallerstein in “What About The Kids”

Thank you Judith Wallerstein! We are indebted to you. Rest in peace while your work continues to impact thousands of children the world over.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Linda Ranson Jacobs is one of the forefront leaders in the area of children and divorce. She developed and created the DivorceCare for Kids programs. DC4K is an international program for churches to use to help children of divorced parents find healing within the arms of a loving church family. As a speaker, author, trainer, program developer and child care center owner, Linda has assisted countless families by modeling and acting on the healing love she has found in Jesus Christ. More great articles about how to successfully minister to the child of divorce in your church can be found at Linda's website [Healthy Loving Partnerships for Our Kids \(HLP4\)](http://www.hlp4.com) [<http://www.hlp4.com>]. Linda also offers support, encouragement, and suggestions to help single parents and those working with single parent children. She can be reached by e-mail at Linda@hlp4.com.

