

Jessica Loehman conducted an interview with Sharon Portwood on May 5, 2011. Dr. Portwood was the Section President 2005-2006.

What initially drew you into the field of maltreatment?

I did some volunteer work at a center that provided short term care for children who had been taken from their homes by DSS – typically following incidents in which the police had arrested the adults present and DSS needed a temporary place to house the children until the agency could sort out placement issues. In the course of my volunteer work, I saw many children with obvious, outward signs of abuse. This really pulled at my heartstrings and made me think that I could put my education and professional skills to work to help maltreated children.

How did you get involved with the Section?

I knew Dr. Jeff Haugaard, who founded the Section, and he got me involved very early on. I was excited about the new Section because there wasn't really a central place within APA for people who were interested in child maltreatment.

When you were president of the Section in 2005, what were some of the goals you were trying to accomplish?

At that time, the Executive Committee was focused on getting students more involved, and there was a lot of good work around putting products like internship guides together for students. I was lucky enough to come on board at a time when people had already started a lot of good things, and it was my job to help these initiatives to gain a foothold to ensure that they continued.

So you were more focused on student involvement in the Section?

Yes, continuing to expand student involvement, but also continuing to reach out to non-academics. One of the continuing challenges we faced was how best to reach out to psychologists who are not affiliated with universities and to make sure that people who are in practice still have a good link back to the Section. This can, of course, start with building strong connections to individuals when they are students.

What were some things that you were able to accomplish as president?

We were so busy, in many respects, just trying to make sure that the Section would take hold and thrive. To that end, I became really involved with Division leadership in my role as Section President. At the time, the Section was so new that we needed to be proactive to make sure that we had a seat at the table. It wasn't that people didn't want to include the Section, but the Section had never been there before. For example, an early draft of a new Division brochure

failed to mention the Section – again, not because we were intentionally excluded, but because we still had a lot of work to do to create awareness of the Section. I hope that I did my part to carry the baton forward to help us get more established as an important part of the Division.

You have touched on this some already, but in what way is the Section important to APA?

I see the Section as the unique link to information and activities specific to child maltreatment for all types of psychologists – students, researchers, academics, and those in private practice. The Section also works to ensure that other Divisions consider issues of child maltreatment that are relevant to their work. For example, child maltreatment is clearly an important issue for many clinicians who are members of Division 12, but since that is a large Division, it helps to have the Section voicing those concerns in partnership with Division 12. The Section can play an important advocacy role for issues of child maltreatment.

How have things changed in the field over your career?

I think excellent work has been done over the years. We know so much more based on good research. The continuing challenge is how we can ensure that sound research findings reach the people who can put that knowledge into practice. While there is more good quality, empirically based knowledge available, it is still so slow to get out to policy and practice. In my experience, people who work in child maltreatment tend to see people who are familiar with work in the area, giving them the mistaken impression that current knowledge is really getting out there. However, then you'll participate in a group outside the direct sphere of child maltreatment and realize that none of them knows about these advances. It's a constant struggle to get the word out.

What are some of the current challenges that face the field?

The biggest one, of course, is budget cuts. Whenever budget cuts come around they seem to hit mental health services for children, making our role as advocates even more important.

What directions should the section take over the next five years?

I would emphasize the continuing need for advocacy. David Finkelhor and his colleagues put out some really good data several years ago demonstrating that significant progress had been made in reducing the incidence of child maltreatment. The researchers were very good to emphasize that all of these advances were in large part due to resources being directed toward prevention. However, now all of those resources are being pulled. I often feel like we make advances as a field, and then we take get pushed backwards. There is still a critical need to get the word out that there is a huge cost to not addressing issues of child maltreatment. Not only is there a tremendous human cost, but there is a very real financial cost to putting future adults

out there who will struggle in multiple areas of their lives. We need advocacy to ensure that the field continues to move forward and that we don't take those backward steps.