

The Magazine of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study

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magazine

Fellow
Abigail
English '71
tackles
a global
problem

Speaking for the Voiceless

Working 9 to 5 *What the Schlesinger Reveals about Working Women*

Obesity and Type 2 Diabetes *What's the Connection?*

Historian Lizabeth Cohen *Steps Up as Interim Dean*

A woman with short, light brown hair and glasses stands against a textured, grey concrete wall. She is wearing a vibrant purple cardigan over a black top, black trousers, and black clogs. Her hands are clasped in front of her. She is wearing a colorful beaded necklace and a silver bracelet. The text "EVOLUTION of an" is overlaid on the image, with "EVOLUTION" in white and "of an" in black.

EVOLUTION of an

***Abigail English
'71, RI '11 has
come a long way
from philosophy
concentrator
to aspiring
policy advisor
on human
trafficking—and
yet it seems she's
been working
toward this her
whole life.***

Advocate

by Ivelisse Estrada

LISTENING TO SOFT-SPOKEN ABIGAIL English, one might never guess the fierceness of her lifelong fight for child and adolescent rights.

In a neat office on the second floor of Byerly Hall, English calmly details her journey from philosophy concentrator at Radcliffe College to health and “wholeness” advocate for girls, adolescents, and the youngest women. Now she’s poised to undertake a monumental challenge: increasing awareness of sexual exploitation and trafficking of the young and vulnerable and changing policy—first in the United States, and then around the world.

A Romantic Revolutionary

English is a member of the Harvard-Radcliffe Class of 1971—which then-University president Nathan Marsh Pusey proclaimed the “worst class ever,” but English has dubbed “romantic revolutionaries, all.” With social issues so much a part of the zeitgeist, she studied philosophy and government, focusing on ethics and political theory, equality, and power.

After graduation, she found a job on the research staff of a Cambridge nonprofit called The Sanctuary, a counseling center and overnight hostel for street youths. While on staff, in the winter of 1971–1972, English embarked on writing *Got Me on the Run: A Study of Runaways* (Beacon Press, 1973) with classmate Richard Bock '71. English and Bock interviewed 60 runaways and 75 adults whose lives they had touched (including parents and counselors), and a two-part study ensued. Part one tells the story of 12 kids, and part two takes a close look at the institutions that failed these adolescents, whether families, schools, or the law. English has tried to understand such failures over the course of her ensuing career.

One of the book’s first narratives, involving a girl the authors call Nancy, throws into stark relief the system’s failure with runaways. Nancy would not return home for fear that she’d be locked up, and scoffed at English and Bock’s offer of legal advice. “In retrospect, after several months of hearing about kids’ experiences with the law and finding out just what ‘rights’

juveniles have, we realize why our offer of ‘legal advice’ was of no help to Nancy,” they write. “Her basic fear did not come from any misunderstanding of the law. She understood all too well what *would* happen to her.”

Laying Down the Law

After Harvard-Radcliffe, English headed west, matriculating at Boalt Hall, the UC Berkeley School of Law. “I went with the intention of working in children’s rights and social justice, which wasn’t a common path in law school in those days,” she says.

Fortunately, Robert H. Mnookin ’64, LLB ’68 was beginning to put together a casebook on children and the law—laying down children’s law, so to speak. English joined Mnookin, now the Williston Professor of Law at Harvard Law School, director of the Harvard Negotiation Research Project, and chair of the Program on Negotiation’s steering committee, as a research assistant. After taking every course on offer related to children, families, education, or social welfare, she found her ideal position 11 months after graduation at what is now the National Center for Youth Law (NCYL), in San Francisco. Her first client was a teen, referred by Mnookin, looking to address the damage done to him in foster care.

Focusing on Adolescent Health

By the late 1970s, after meeting a few San Francisco Bay Area physicians who were early leaders in adolescent health, English became involved in the legal issues faced by their teenaged patients. “Some of the central issues had to do with consent and confidentiality,” she says. “But also with financial access—those physicians were often taking care of low-income adolescents, a vulnerable group for whom I felt similarly compelled to advocate.”

During her two decades at NCYL, English became increasingly interested in the legal and constitutional aspects of reproductive health care for young people. This led to her involvement in

several precedent-setting cases on the reproductive health care rights of adolescents.

Ultimately, her interests led to a major personal and career move. “I thought it would be worthwhile to have a center focused entirely on the legal issues in adolescent health,” she says. “So I founded this very small but ambitious non-profit organization.”

English’s matter-of-fact statement belies a much larger risk. She moved across the country, to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to realize her dream of bringing the Center for Adolescent Health & the Law (CAHL) into being. The center opened in 1999. “Our mission is to support laws and policies that promote the health of adolescents and their access to comprehensive health care,” says English—by which she means the full spectrum of preventive, sexual, and mental health services.

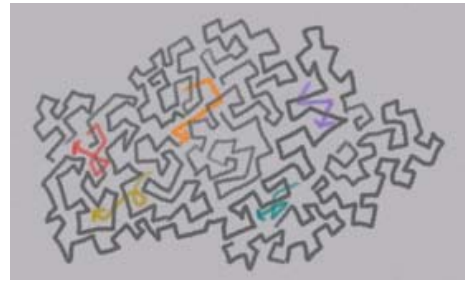
A New Fight

On New Year’s Eve 2008, a new fight chose English: In that day’s *New York Times*, Nicholas D. Kristof ’82 published an op-ed disturbingly titled “The Evil Behind the Smiles,” which detailed the ugly underbelly of sexual tourism in Cambodia. English had a strong reaction to the story of Sina Vann—kidnapped at the age of 13, drugged, sold to a Western stranger for her virginity, and then raped and tortured. “My heart sped up, my palms got sweaty, the hair stood up on the back of my neck—I wanted to throw up,” she recalls. “This was vulnerability in a different universe, an assault on humanity of an entirely different order of magnitude.” By the time Kristof followed with “If This Isn’t Slavery, What Is?” three days later, English had resolved to do something transformational about this victimization—but what?

Since that cold winter day, English has immersed herself in the problem. Now she sees sexual exploitation and trafficking as an extension of the everyday abuse, neglect, injustice, and devaluation that children and adolescents experience.

BRINGING THE ARTS INTO HER PRACTICE

Drawing and poetry temper the sting



A firm believer in the power of art to put serious issues in sharp relief, Abigail English has experimented with poetry and drawing. Here is a poem she wrote after a visit five years ago to Las Vegas for an adolescent health conference—“which left me reeling from the sexualized environment and its effect on young people,” she says. The drawing above, *Lost*, complements the poem.

WHAT TERROR TENDERS

It’s alien, the land I’ve landed in—
slot machines, vertebrate, grasping for coins,
airport oddities astonishing as I stare,
already shrunk from lights.

MGM and Mandalay Bay, arrayed
and energy-lit by day, and night,
arise from a beckoning desert,
behemoths in their unearthly glitter.

“Vegas,” in truth, is neither fair nor lucky—
lose your shirt or win a fortune, here
everything is proffered on a dare . . .
and I, a meeting-goer, only here by chance.

The youngest women strut and gallivant,
their strappy sandals and spaghetti straps
of sensuality on offer—with them
I walk the “streets” of fantasy hotels.

Theirs is a false, if amorous, bravado:
I hear them saying, once again,
we chose to do it so it’s not assault,
when really they were forced.

So who could possibly believe them?
too young, too psyched, and much too drugged,
these are the women-children who will learn
too soon the pain that glamour masks.

I’ve studied them of course, yet never
really seen them, nor walked in searing
footprints of the desert’s torn and left behind,
with whom I am both one, and other.

“LVNV” itself suggests what terror tenders
—bizarre and cruel mirage of purchased love—
oft envied, never real, where gamers play
with shadowy instincts devouring our young.

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The Path Ahead

English has conducted research on law, human rights, health, and the arts with help from two undergraduate Radcliffe Research Partners, Sophie LeGros '12 and Emma Wang '12. "The resources available through the libraries here have been extraordinarily helpful in getting up to speed on multiple aspects of this hydra-headed problem," says English.

The main thrust of her sexual exploitation and trafficking work from here forward will be to make it difficult, if not impossible, for the lay and professional public to ignore the problem.

Initially, English will develop recommendations about health, law, and human rights—outlining what lawyers, physicians, and other health care professionals can do. She'll reach these professionals through written reports and articles, conferences, and Web sites, with information and tools to help them tackle the problem by working to improve and implement beneficial treaties, laws, and policies. Her familiarity with the US legal system means that she'll start with US policy and work out from there.

She will also write a book to reach the broader public. Because denial appears to be at the heart of the tragedy, she will focus on

increasing awareness so that others can become inspired to enact their own brand of change. Not a mother herself, she feels this idea will be her primary generative legacy. She's keenly aware that money is central to the problem; current economic concerns could push the sexual exploitation of adolescents out of public view and sideline possible solutions.

"Young people don't just stop in their tracks and wait for the economy to recover or solutions to be found," English explains. "Those who are teenagers now are going to suffer, and that's unconscionable."

English has turned to art—her own and others'—to process this uneasy knowledge. She is working on a collection of drawings and poetry—now more than halfway complete—that chronicle her emotional reactions to the suffering of sexual exploitation, trafficking, and abuse. She employed a muse this year for inspiration to make sure she accomplishes her goal, but she's not saying whether her muse is human or something out of her mythic South.

Then and Now

Asked to reflect on her personal and career path since she graduated from Radcliffe, English

is thoughtful. "In a powerful way, I feel that I've come full circle," she says. "A lot of the issues I thought about then, I'm thinking about now—although at a more intense, troubling, and challenging level." She recalls the optimism of that time, and the sense that there was no limit to what she could achieve for the rights of children.

Today, achieving justice for the "left out, left alone, and left behind" feels positively Sisyphean to her. "I have no less sense of commitment, no less strong intention to pursue ways of protecting young people's rights—but it feels like it's more difficult now," English says. "I might have been naive, but I truly thought it would get easier, not harder."

It may yet get easier, in no small part owing to her efforts: In late April, English spoke to students at the College in a class titled Human Trafficking—the first time such a class has been offered to undergraduates at Harvard. She says she felt honored to be part of this groundbreaking event, even in a small way. Earlier in the year, she spoke to the adolescent medicine trainees at Boston Children's Hospital, a forum full of responsive young physicians. Could she have inspired the romantic revolutionaries of the future? ✧

✦ "In a powerful way, I feel that I've come full circle," says English, who held the Frieda L. Miller Fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute. "A lot of issues I thought about as an undergraduate, I'm thinking about now."

INVALUABLE EXCHANGE

During her fellowship year, English met with **ORLANDO H. L. PATTERSON '71**, the John Cowles Professor of Sociology, who is teaching the first course on human trafficking ever offered to undergraduates at Harvard. **JACQUELINE BHABHA** was also an invaluable resource—as were all her associated organizations: Bhabha is the Jeremiah Smith Jr. Lecturer in Law at Harvard Law School,

director of research at the François Bagnoud Xavier Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard, lecturer on public policy at Harvard Kennedy School, member of the faculty at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, and the University advisor on human rights education to the provost of Harvard University. **AMBASSADOR SWANEE HUNT**, Eleanor Roosevelt Lecturer in Public Policy at

the Kennedy School and senior advisor to the Carr Center on Human Rights, provided inspiration as well. In December, the Carr Center even cosponsored "Human Rights and Sex Trafficking: A Film Forum," which screened 12 documentaries—and which English found extraordinarily moving on a personal level, citing the forum's tag line: "Film reaches the soul and creates lasting

empathy." English's fellow fellows provided much food for thought; she found kindred spirits in two in particular: **ANN JONES RI '11** and **NICK TURSE RI '11**. "They've both been working on very troubling subjects that involve issues the public doesn't want to think about—but should think about," she says. "So they have a special understanding of how challenging it is to take this kind of material and

present it to the world." Ann Jones has written extensively about violence against women and is working on a book about the domestic costs of America's wars abroad, titled "When War Comes Home." Nick Turse—an award-winning journalist, historian, and essayist—is compiling a history of US war crimes and Vietnamese civilian suffering during the Vietnam War.