

Thank you to everyone for such a wonderful response to the first issue of **SBWnotes**! We are pleased to continue sharing with you interesting and insightful items from the field of gerontological social work practice. And remember, if you have a professional experience or come across an article or event to share, please email it to us at [information@sbwpartners.com](mailto:information@sbwpartners.com) for inclusion in our next bulletin.

## Breaking the Cycle of Elder Abuse

As reported in our last issue, *New York Times* reporter N.R. (also known as Sonny) Kleinfield was awarded the Carroll Kowal Journalism Award on April 10<sup>th</sup> from the Fund for the Advancement of Social Services for his article on elder abuse - "Bowed by Age and Battered by an Addicted Nephew." In presenting the award, FASS board member Ann Burack-Weiss remarked on the implications of the article for the social work profession. (*continued on page 2*)

## The Beatrice M. Goldberg Lecture on "Spiritual Perspectives on Late Life Challenges"

Growing attention is being paid to the role of spirituality in the lives of frail older adults and the role of social workers and care managers in promoting spiritual well-being. Leonie Nowitz, Director of the Center for Lifelong Growth, will be the guest speaker for the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Beatrice Goldberg Lecture on Wednesday, May 24, 2006, 4:30 pm. The lecture is being held at the Roosevelt Division of St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital Center. Conference Room B, 1000 Tenth Avenue. Your attendance and a contribution are very welcome.

## 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Jarvie Colloquium

Another exciting spring event is the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Jarvie Colloquium on June 9, 2006 entitled "The Many Ways of Being Connected: Social Strengths of Older People." For more information and registration, please call 212.870.2964 or visit the following website: <http://www.jarvie.org/annualcoll.html>.

## The Risk of Death for Those Caring for Elderly Spouses

A recent study reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and the *New York Times*, Feb. 19, 2006, confirms what we have observed for many years - that the stress of caring for an ill and disabled partner has deleterious effects on the health of the caregiver. In this survey of the records of over 500,000 husbands and wives, most over the age of 70, it was found that losing a spouse increased the caregiver's risk of dying prematurely by 20%. The diseases that cause the highest increase in risks for caregivers were dementia and psychiatric disorders.

## The Link Between Depression and Physical Disability

Extensive research findings document the strong association between depression and functional disability in late life, including vision impairment. In addition to psychopharmacological and psychosocial treatments for depression, direct intervention to decrease disability through rehabilitation needs to be considered. (Horowitz, A., et. al. (Sept. 2003). The influence of Health, Social Support Quality, and Rehabilitation Among Disabled Elders, *Aging and Mental Health*. 7(5) 342-350)

## Practice Thoughts

*Is it resistance or resilience?*

SBW Partners is a fee-for-service firm devoted to advancing social work practice in aging. Services are provided by the firm's founding partners, Dr. Barbara Silverstone and Dr. Ann Burack-Weiss, and a group of associates. We provide services to agencies and practitioners, corporate training programs and a variety of accredited courses. Please visit us at [www.sbwpartners.com](http://www.sbwpartners.com) for more information.

## Breaking the Cycle of Elder Abuse *(continued from page 1)*

### Remarks by Ann Burack-Weiss

We live in a power-point world - where information takes the place of understanding and the murkiest of topics is simplistically rendered. Take, for example, Sonny Kleinfeld's prize-winning article on elder abuse. A typical staff training would begin with a definition. Followed by a list of prevalence statistics. Followed by a list of the 8 or 10 signs and symptoms. Followed by a list of reasons elder abuse is under-reported (embarrassment and shame, mingled feelings of pity and anger, fear and dependence.) Followed by a list of legal remedies and social supports available to the victimized.

Contradiction and complexity are notably absent from what now passes for understanding of social problems or what to do about them. And it takes a writer with the skill of Sonny Kleinfeld to alert us to what is missing. The story he tells is compelling. Childless, elderly sisters, Lillian and Julia, take a beloved nephew into their home. As his drug problem and need for funds to sustain it escalate, they are financially depleted, personally degraded, physically and psychologically abused. Years pass. In time - but far from soon enough and far from completely enough - he is legally removed from the scene. The sisters begin their slow road to recover what they lost - knowing that as long as he lives the nightmare could begin again.

Why did it take so long for help to arrive? Kleinfeld writes "It is something to wonder: How many people knew of the sisters' broken lives? The short answer to the question of how many knew is, enough."

Let us not look at the relatives and friends who all had reasons for their action or inaction. Let us look at ourselves - social workers - in the story and ask: How did **we** do? The Kowal award was established by social workers to enhance the public's understanding of the difficulties faced by our clients. Perhaps there was a bit of hubris here. We understood - it was others who needed to understand. But let's trace the sisters' journey with the system.

Who was involved along the way? Social workers from four different agencies, the NYC Police Department, and the Brooklyn District Attorney's office. There was a pattern here. One visit or one phone call, a form was filled out, and a decision was made not to pursue because the sisters - torn in their allegiance to family and their need to be saved - refused to cooperate. How was the pattern broken????

Not by any of the social agencies or their staffs but by the District Attorney and a police detective! And how did they do it? Noting the impoverishment of the sisters dwelling, the police detective brought them concrete items (like bedding) to make the place feel more like home. Concerned that they were unable to say anything bad about their nephew when together, the detective conferred with the DA who suggested that they be seen individually. And, acting on her own instincts, the police detective bought breakfast. Kleinfeld writes, "Over cake, Lillian gave him up."

Now perhaps Lillian was, finally, ready. But you can't help but think it was the human connection, the relationship with a caring other that made it happen. And wonder - how as social workers did we forget this? Where family relationships are fractured and emotions run high, there is ambivalence. But ambivalence can be overcome, decisions can be made. We need to keep calling, keep knocking on the door, keep listening, offering concrete services and - sometimes, yes - food. Let frightened people get to know us and trust us and... it often works. The social work profession has known this for at least 100 years! It is dandy that a police detective could do it. But shouldn't we have done it first??

Large caseloads and untrained front-line staff are often given as the reason why our professional understanding of how to help people cannot be translated into action. Still, the social work time expended on the situation could have been better used. Sonny Kleinfeld's article is a wake-up call, a charge to reconnect with our social work base of knowledge, values and skills. To move beyond power-point presentations of information on a social problem to hands-on training of how to speak to and listen to clients. To move beyond the filling out of forms to connecting with the people those forms represent.