Renowned sociologist speaks on child welfare

By Jim Dukett

The Crusader NEWS STAFF

Monday night, in the Hogan Campus Center, child welfare expert and internationally known sociologist Richard Gelles delivered his lecture: "Children First: Recommendations for Child Welfare Reform." Gelles lectures frequently throughout the country and the world and has authored 20 books and over 100 articles. He has also appeared on such television shows as "Oprah," "Dateline," and "The Today Show." He holds the Joanne and Randall Pemberton Chair of Child Welfare and Family Violence in the School of Social Work at the University of Pennsylvania, and is originally from the Worcester area. The lecture was sponsored by the Peace and Conflicts Studies concentration and was open to the public.

Gelles described his topic as one that is, "easy to talk about, while at the same time being very difficult." He added that child welfare itself is an "oxymoron," and said, "there is no time of day when this is an easy speed to give.

Gelles began his lecture by sharing some statistics intended to illustrate the state of child welfare in the country today. There are currently 27 states that are involved in court cases regarding Child Welfare, and New Jersey is soon to join them because of the recent class action lawsuit brought against the state. Gelles pointed out that there are three million child welfare cases reported each year, and 2.6 million children are considered valid to investigate. Of these 2.6 million, 1.2 million are substantiated and of those 2.0 million children end up getting moved from their homes.

The goal of the current child welfare system continues to be reunification of the family, but Gelles argued that this is not the best policy to have. To illustrate the problems with the current child welfare system, he told the story of two boys of the ages of five and three who lived with their heroin-dependent mother and her boyfriend in West Philadelphia. Both the boys had different fathers. When a report of possible sexual and physical abuse against the boys by the bands of their mother's boyfriend was made, they were removed from the home. Over the next few years, the boys were moved five times and at one point they were in separate homes. The goal throughout the evolution of the case was still reunification of the boys and their mother, who had become paranoid in a domestic fight after her sons were removed from the home and had never attempted contact with her sons. The boys were finally adopted by a single African-American woman, a fact that grieves attaches partly to the child welfare system's practice of "Thou shall match races."

After some years under the new woman's care, during which time the oldest boy set fire to the woman's home and was sentenced to three months probation with the child of her oldest adopted son. At this time the boy was 15 years old. He had been sexually abused by his adoptive mother since he was nine years old. Currently, the boy lives with his younger brother, his adoptive mother, and his adoptive father.

According to Gelles, this example reveals the tragedy of the child welfare system. "He pointed out that children are "not well-protected parents, only barely adequate parents."

"The Tragedy of the Child Welfare System" comes in three parts. The first is that it is "not sufficiently to have good intentions." Gelles argued that there must be a change when parents "just don't get a second chance." If reunification is the goal, then the child must be placed elsewhere.

The second part of the "tragedy" is that "the system tries to "make social policy by anecdote." The current child welfare system relies too heavily on judgment by broad social standards, and not enough on the individual cases. Gelles argued that the system should be changed so that the child is the focus, not just the family.

The final part to the "tragedy" is that "the child welfare system is largely reactive, and concentrates little on how problems are caused, only paying attention to problems when they emerge, not preventing them." Gelles said, "The system is largely reactive, doing little to provide help for families other than to create the stigma of being investigated."

During his lecture, Gelles suggested that the mission of the child welfare system needs to be more focused, and that agencies "need to have a common goal and make sure everyone is on track with that goal." By changing the focus of the system to help the children in these situations, Gelles hopes that less cases will end up like his example.

"I was very interested that this year in Massachusetts, 25,000 children will leave the Child Welfare System because they have reached the age of 17. These children will have very little support, and very little help that they can continue to live productive lives. As Gelles put it, "Kids ought not be left in harm's way if you want them to succeed."

Expert page 4

Worcester area writer an inspiration to young authors

By Maureen Malone

The Crusader NEWS STAFF


At the reading, Bernardi was introduced by Professor James Kee, chair of the English Department, which sponsored the event. Kee cited Bernardi as an inspiration to young writers, and many of her current stories were written in her youth. The Worcester-area author is a graduate of Carleton College and the University of Chicago and was the 1995 recipient of the James Fellow- ship for Novel awarded by the Herkin Group Foundation. Bernardi also received the A.E. Coppard Award for Short Fiction. Her novel, "The Day Laid on the Altar," was awarded the Bakeless Literary Publica- tion Prize for Fiction in 1999 by the Bread Loaf Writers Conference. It is the story of a remote 16th century Italian Village, and the lives of the family of the renais- sance artist Titian.

Reading from "The Day Laid on the Altar," Bernardi selected a passage from the character Lavina’s section of the novel. From this short excerpt, the potent visual imagery of the entire novel became apparent.

Bernardi also shared passages from a story entitled "Straight Shot," which explores the ambiguities and worries of a young child trapped in a car on a family trip. "Straight Shot" is part of a collection of stories that was awarded the 2000 Drue Heinz Literature Prize.

Year-long Mexico program allows graduates to serve poor in Tlapa

By Joel Digrado

The Crusader NEWS STAFF

The Chaplains’ Office, led by Kim McElaney, is putting together another program for graduates interested in serving in Latin America. Building from the existing Mexico Program, The Graduate Program in Mexico offers the opportunity to return to Tlapa. The central idea behind this program is to give students a chance to live alongside the people of this poor region and to empathize with their living conditions.

"The Cross has a long tradition of volunteerism. Year after year the College sends students to the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and other service-related organizations. Keeping with this precedent, the Chaplains’ Office has developed a program specific to the Holy Cross community and Latin studies. The graduates work in various American settings and many are involved with the Human Rights Organization."

The Holy Cross’ graduate program in Tlapa is unique from other programs in several ways. First, the program is only one year long. Second, it is only one year rather than the usual two required by most other service pro- grams. Finally, the emphasis of this program is less centered around workshops and more around immersion. Living the way these people do is very important part of the program.

The graduates work together in a community. They have to share responsibilities for the household. This may not seem taxing on its face but in the dusty town of Tlapa the everyday household chores are quite demanding. Because the town is so dry, water is not conserved and, in many ways, reused. To make matters worse, the graduates reuse the water that they boiled pasta in for other chores like washing down the roads to keep the dust down," McElaney explained.

The spiritual aspect of the program is also very important. The experience is deepened by the values found in the Gospel. While participating in the program, the graduates commit to weekly prayer and reflection together.

The Graduate Program in Mexico provides students with the opportunity to strengthen their faith, build firmer relationships, and extend the Holy Cross community. Those who elect to participate understand themselves as connected to Holy Cross and as responsible for giving back through witness, challenge, and mentoring.