

## Summary

### Telling Our Stories Women's Practitioner Gathering

About 40 people gathered at the home of Ruth and Michael Cernea Thursday evening, February 8, 2007, to share stories of their lives. Many "thank you"s to Ruth and Michael for hosting WAPA at their wonderful home!

The event was to celebrate and discuss our lives with the authors of four chapters in the recently published NAPA Bulletin #26, *Making History at the Frontier, Women Creating Career as Practicing Anthropologists*. The chapter authors Jay Schensul, Mari Clarke, Susan Racine Passmore, and Shirley Fiske were there to start the conversation. The event's timing in February was to take advantage of Jay Schensul's being in Washington, D.C. – otherwise she is temporarily in Los Angeles at UCLA as a visiting professor. Thank you, Jay, for being with us and inspiring the conversation.

After briefly explaining the purpose of the bulletin, the process by which it was developed, and a few highlights of the bulletin, we went around the room. The first five people were shortchanged because the process transformed itself into a sharing of peoples' experiences. The richness was wonderful and my regret is that the first presenters didn't get a chance to share in depth. One of the touchstone phrases of the evening was credited to Mary Odell Butler's chapter title "A Random Walk." The idea touched in many women's expressions of their lives.

The range of work and struggles to use and keep in touch with anthropological roots was impressive. People shared their stories, from consultancies with a network on tobacco control; a specialist in migrant health care, elderly and disabled housing at HUD; a business owner with a firm specializing in technology and social change (with anthropology at the heart of social change); pursuing medical anthropology as a nurse practitioner; health research; a person who established ethnography at the U.S. Census and is now pursuing her roots and passion representing indigenous groups in the Amazon; and a consultant working on corporate social responsibility, among many other areas. We heard about the difficulty of transitioning from intense anthropology experiences in Colombia to U.S. graduate programs, dispassionate, and career options in the U.S.; aspirations to bring anthropology out in the public sphere; the struggle of following your dream as a single person working in cultural resource management, to the challenge of having a PhD in food nutrition in a traditional geographic area, and having to raise children and find a job at the same time. Others had successful institutes carved from many banks, or a life woven from trying to understand 'people' and 'meaning' and figure out what to do. Some found the bulletin compelling because they realized they did not have to worry so much about having a clearly delineated future – there are plenty of models of how "random walks" turned into sustainable and rewarding jobs. Another completed her degree and started a coalition to combat organ trafficking. Forgive me if I did not capture the nuances – it was a challenge to get everyone recorded.

There were strong themes that emerged from the discussion:

- The discussion of gender kept popping up and the assessment that gender is a big component of our lives. Quite a few mentioned that taking on caregiving roles – whether for the older generation, kids, or significant others – are very much a part of gender, and that role demands a flexible working schedule and more “zig zag” to the career path. It has definitely influenced our career paths and women tend to take on the caregiver role more than men.
- Suggestions for a next publication or steps included adding men to a new volume which would add a sense of dialog and including practicing women anthropologists from other cultural contexts and countries. Some felt that men had very similar experiences, and others felt there should be a more structured approach (more of an experimental design) to draw out men’s experience in pursuing practicing careers. This would be a good starting point for further discussion.
- Many echoed the idea that our lives are “random walks,” moving from employment to employment, contingent on family and personal contingencies. And it’s OK, it can be successful.
- Don’t be afraid to take risks.
- Creativity is a key to success.
- It’s hard even when – or especially when – you are single.
- We have mission statements: anthropology is the tool we use to get there.

**Resources for reading:** It was recommended to read Mary Catherine Bateson’s book (1989) *Composing a Life*. NY: Atlantic Monthly Press.) Full circles, overlapping lives. Be adaptable, flexible, spiral, not going straight but in a spiral.

Also, just out is *Women in Anthropology. Autobiographical Narratives and Social History*. Edited by Mary Cattrell and Marjorie Schweitzer, 2007. Left Coast Press. It includes a chapter by WAPA member Molly Schuchat.

The evening started with a fully contributed potluck thanks to generous WAPA members who brought dishes to share. I would say the emphasis was on “Mediterranean favorites” with fruits, tamales, and chicken added in. The dishes were spread on Ruth’s generous-sized table and there was plenty. One of the themes from the discussion was women assuming the role of sustainers, caregivers and providers; and this certainly was borne out on the potluck. For the record, there were a few males who braved the event, and who were welcomed and appreciated – probably about four, but they stayed the whole evening!

The evening ended with warmth and energy, as we faced the 20 degree weather outside going home. I am not sure what will happen from here, but I have the e-mails of a set of people who would like to keep in touch. The authors of the chapters of the book, along with editor Christina Wasson, are testing the waters to find the depth of publisher interest in a follow-on book with a different set of themes while still focusing on women (and potentially men) practitioners.

The organizers were impressed with the depth of experience, and urged the participants to consider nomination for the PRAXIS award, due to be awarded this fall.

Contributed by Shirley Fiske, with help from Mari Clarke and Susan Racine Passmore