

Interview Profile: Dr. Barbara Barlow, M.D.
Submitted by Tacey A. Rosolowski
25 June 2008

This interview with Dr. Barbara Barlow (b. 20 June 1938) was conducted on 17 June 2008 in the offices of The Injury Free Coalition at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health in New York City. Surrounded by photographs of children in playgrounds and windows overlooking Harlem, Dr. Barbara Barlow speaks about her career as a pediatric surgeon and advocate for the prevention of children's injuries. Dr. Barlow is currently Director of Surgery at Harlem Hospital, Professor of Surgery and Public Health at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, and Director of The Injury Free Coalition. She won the Alma Dea Morani Award for Renaissance Women in Medicine in 2001. The interview was conducted in two sessions of approximately one hour and forty five minutes each with a break for lunch. The total interview is 3 hours and 40 minutes. It was conducted by Tacey A. Rosolowski, Ph.D.

Dr. Barlow is an assertive, articulate woman of with great humor. During the first hour, Dr. Barlow describes her early life, education, and career inspirations. Her religious family instilled in her a sense of social service. Her father, who had dreamed of becoming a physician, died when young Barbara was 16 and galvanized her desire to study medicine. Her mother became her role model when she went back to work and studied for an MA and Ph.D. in order to support her two children. Dr. Barlow believed she "could do anything." She attended Vassar and praises single-sex education for women at the time. She went on to take a Masters in psychology at Columbia University and to earn her M.D. at Albert Einstein College of Medicine. She explains that she convinced the director to accept her—even though she had not yet taken basic science courses required for medical study.

During the second ninety minutes, Dr. Barlow talks about the connection between her specialty in pediatric surgery and her community activism. She discusses the challenges of pediatric surgery, the "stereotypes" of surgeons (largely true, she says), and the unique qualities women bring to surgery. She was called "the crying surgeon" at Harlem Hospital: her horror at seeing injured children in the operating room motivated her take action in the area of injury prevention. She outlines the challenges of establishing her window-guard and playground programs. She battled the medical community's resistance to seeing community action as part of its role. A self-described "pit bull," she describes her success at involving communities, religious leaders, law enforcement, and city and other government agencies in preventative action.

After a lunch break, Dr. Barlow tells how she broadened her Harlem initiatives into national programs. She comments on her management style as she describes building coalitions with other medical professionals and government representatives. She discusses using her research program to quantify injury rates and build local, regional, and national support for prevention programs. In the final hour of the interview, Dr. Barlow gives an overview of her career decisions and what it meant to be a woman in the male bastion of surgery. She feels she was spared conflict, since she loves children, yet could have none of her own for medical reasons. She shares other dimensions of her personal life: gardening and watching sunsets from her home in Florida. She describes herself as fortunate to have found a husband, Andre Mruzek, whom she married at forty and who is supportive and proud of her achievements.

This is a portrait of a driven woman, who sacrificed dimensions of her personal life for her career and for the satisfaction of “leaving the world a better place.”