

Interviewee: Libby Kirsch  
Interviewer: Alexandria Pipitone Schworn  
Date: March 3, 2022

LK: I feel like it's a real toss-up who learned more. I think it was me because I repeated kindergarten forty-four times. [Laughter] So I know the nuances.

[Break in recording]

APS: Hi, my name is Alexandria Pipitone Schworn, and I'm here at The Children's Creative Learning Center at FIU [Florida International University] to interview Libby Kirsch, who was the Associate Director and Teacher here for over 40 years.

[Break in recording. Beginning of Interview]

LK: My name is Libby Kirsch and when I was here, I was always known as Libby. So anywhere I went on campus, it was Libby, and the trail of children who were always behind me. I came to this campus, well, more than 44 years ago. And I had been studying my masters at the University of Miami, in Early Childhood. And there used to be, like, a YMCA that was down by Eighty-seventh Avenue and Eighth Street at the time when Eighth Street was a two-lane road [Narrator clarification: It was a Jewish Community Center (JCC), also known as a Young Men's Hebrew Association (YMHA)]. And I taught swimming there. And someone who worked there was actually hired here and her name, Nancy Ponn, who was the founding director of this program. And I have been working with her part time while I was getting my Master's [degree], because she ran what was then the first daycare classroom because it went all day. And I was working in the nursery school part that was just, like, for three hours a day. So, I decided I would apply for a position here at the university. So, when I came to FIU, it was like another planet, it was just tall, tall, tall grass, everywhere. And there was one building the PC [Primera Casa] building. And it looked like it was from outer space. And that's where I went for my interview, and I was hired. And that was in the summer of 1975. And so, in September 1975, that's when the Center opened. It opened in one trailer that is still here to this day. . . So, mixing it up a little bit, I had retired in September 2019. So I had been working and growing myself here as the University did for 44 years so I saw quite a lot and I feel very fortunate to have been here.

APS: That's so nice, Libby. You know, I've seen the cottage. We aren't currently in the cottage. When was this building – How did this come together? Were you a part of that? How did that go?

LK: Absolutely. We had the cottage, which was a portable. And we had another one which we called the Lodge. And that's when we doubled our capacity after our first ten years. And we were an agency of the United Way at that time, because the state of Florida could not be involved in childcare. And so, some parents who were students and one of the vice presidents of the university, went to United Way and petitioned United Way. And we were one of three sites that was given money to open a program. So that's kind of how it

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started. And then at one point, around the twenty-year mark – around that time – around 1995, we were allotted a lot of money that came from this relationship between the President of the University at the time, Mitch Maidique, and the Women's Committee on campus. So, there was a bunch of money that was given through CITF [Capital Improvement Trust Fund] money and some of it was moved to support the building of this building. So, we had the president here, actually in the yard where children play now. We had a groundbreaking ceremony. The children built buildings out of their blocks, and we had them all on display in in the playground. We had dignitaries here and we all had gold shovels and hard hats and we literally broke the ground on that day. And the children who were in my class at that time are now about 30 years old – 32 – maybe 35 years old. So, when this building was actually built – and we were in session in the portables the whole time the building was being built. So that's how we commandeered the playground that was out by the tennis courts because we had nowhere else to play. Because the playground was the loading area for this construction site. So, we watched every day. And we designed the windows, the walls, the doors, the doorknobs low so the children could get in and out, things like that. And how much light we were going to be able to have in the building. I used to come in with the children, some of them – some of them who are very small for their age, because we actually measured with the children to make sure they could reach the sink, and that there was going to be a sink just for them and a sink for the adults where the hot water would be. And so, they'd make sure they could see out the window. So, they wouldn't have to climb into the windowsills, they could just do that. And it was going to be on behalf of them. So that's how we did it. And so, we brought the children in every once in a while, to check it out. And I remember I took butcher paper to lay out all the furniture, the furniture that I had chosen and where the easels could go where the tables could go. And it was all out of butcher paper, which is brown paper, and laid it all out make sure it would all fit before I actually bought it all. But back in the day – and it's so it was like a gift and gigantic, gigantic gift. So, from the color of the cabinets, to what was on the floor, to the fixtures in the bathroom. And so, at the time, myself, and the director, Nancy, felt like – we felt like we were architects because we really had to guide them. We were in all of their meetings and we – we even – we even met and kind of decided who was going to be the architect, because they made it very childlike instead of childish. A lot of the architect firms, they built buildings for businesses or warehouses or things like that. And so, the firm that we had worked with us as best that they could,

APS: And you can tell because – it's – not much has changed in the building, you know, the office spaces have changed, and little things here and there but it still serves its purpose, and you did a great job.

LK: Thank you, very proud of it, very proud of it.

APS: This classroom was chosen specifically for this interview. And why is that?

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LK: This was my classroom. And it feels good to be here. [Crying]

APS: We're so happy to have you here, Libby.

[Break in recording]

LK: I didn't expect to come in here or feel like this. But I feel so excited like I – like I won a prize.

[Break in recording]

APS: Obviously, FIU and CCLC [Children's Creative Learning Center] mean a lot to you, you can see that, and I think anybody who steps in or knows you, can believe that, too. So, what do you believe that are some of the most impactful events or moments in your time at FIU [Florida International University] and the Center?

LK: Well, a long time ago, in the last millennium, I think it was maybe around 1980, President Wolfe came to visit us and just came in the trailer. And I don't know if it was an open house, but there were some grandparents there and he went right over to them and chatted with them and he was very warm and very welcoming. And he made it a point to come and visit us so that was really important to me. President Rosenberg used to come and visit us when he first became president. And he made it a point to come in here. And he said, "well, you girls are doing a great job here" and so he knew he could count on us. And . . . I used to have a lot of access when things were not so [Air quotes] legally binding on campus. And you could go outside with the children and go take a walk and you didn't have to, per se have a field trip slip to take a walk. We used to have bake sales, a lot of bake sales, and that helped give us exposure on campus. And so, the eldest children used to go on the walks for the bake sales. And because some of the vice presidents and people in the administration helped promote the Children's Center and their children attended the Children's Center, I had a lot of access to the fifth floor. And I used to just go up in the elevator with the children with our baskets whatever we had, and I used to march into Paul Gallagher's office or Irene Manos or Alex Zyne, wherever need be, or I'd knock on the door and the E [Executive]-Five is meeting and I open the door and I'd say "hi guys", you know, we used to leave messages on the President's desk and we . . . when the building was being built, and there was a lot of I guess rubble or leftover rocks of fill, it was used to build us a hill by the remote playground that we had. Because prior to that, there was a hill there. Because in the late 1970s, there was a golf team. And out past the tennis courts where the women's softball stadium is, was a par three hole – golf hole. So, the green was this raised area and when the golf team went by the wayside, we, of course, took over the hill, because that was such a great thing, a hill! Nobody ever sees a hill around here. So, there was a hill. So, we used to play on it and at one point, the

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hill was taken away for some other prefabricated buildings to be put in. So, we went and marched on Dr. Gallagher's office, and left him a photograph and a sign and a rock that we wanted our hill back. So, he agreed to sod the fill that was left from working on the buildings. So, we got our hill back. So, things like that were so meaningful. When we used to walk all over campus and pick up litter on Earth Day, and we were here when it was the first Earth Day, you know, and "what's Earth Day?" and it's something that's always been important to me and put that love into the children and so, for them, it was like a treasure hunt. And we'd all go out with our latex gloves on and pick up all kinds of litter all over campus that would blow around. The campus isn't like that anymore, it's very well cared for. [Laughter] There's not much litter around even though we would do that, from time to time. We wouldn't find too much. So, things like that are points I remember. I remember when I think it was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the university and we were celebrating out on the steps of GC [Graham Center]. And they were tent there and there was like a lunch party and champagne and all kinds of things like that. One – a couple – there's been a many things. The Dalai Lama was here. And I saw him and got to talk to him actually. So, when he came to campus for the first time, the building was new, and I felt like I wanted a blessing for the building. So, I took a pebble out from the front of the building and a flower. And it just so happened that when I crossed the parking lot to go into the arena, he was pulling up with his entourage in the back parking lot there as we crossed to go in. And he got out of the limo in his robes, and he was wearing Topsiders. [Laughter] So I said, actually hello to him and gave him the flower and it was really an amazing moment, amazing moment. Going into the ballroom and listening to Deepak Chopra speak. Carl Sagan – I heard Carl Sagan speak here. And that's, you know, things personal to me. But as the university grew, my role grew at the center. Although I never stopped teaching, I feel like I had many jobs. I just never changed my geographic location. So, in any way the university grew, I also grew. I don't know if that answers that question.

APS: That answers it so many times over. It really leads us into the next kind of portion of the interview. Speaking about the visitors that came to campus, you know, the Dalai Lama. So, at FIU, we really talk about that "International is our middle name". So, among the things that you spoke about, what does the "I" in Florida International University mean to you and why?

LK: Well, speaking from an "I" position, which is something so often said here at the Center, to speak for yourself, and help the children learn to speak for themselves, "what do you want, this is what I want?", "How are you going to go about that?" And the "I" and international was such a gigantic gift here because I do feel like the University is quite international. I think that sometimes because there are many Spanish speakers here, that it seems maybe not quite as global per se. But in my viewpoint, I really think it is from the faculty down to the children here in the Center. We have this magical attraction to people from all over the world because they come to the University, or they're hired by the

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University. And they come with their families, or they come with children. And then those children have the opportunity to attend school here and then they learn about the global community, so I very much think it's international. I know how to say "hello" in a lot of languages that people might not expect: Japanese, Korean, Russian, Farsi, French, even English. [Laughter] And then learning customs from the different families. If I had my eyes open, I learned a lot of things. And then grandparents would come from halfway around the world to come and see their grandchild's school. And maybe it was a once a year or maybe a one-time visit, after four years of not seeing their own families, and learning how to respond to say hello appropriately to people from different lands. And even though I didn't have the opportunity to go to those other places, I learned about those places by being here. So, we really used to have this huge international celebration here, as the University had International Week on campus, we would have that here and we would have it for more than a week. And parents would wear costumes, they would build out things in the classroom. We had different continents in the different classrooms, and we had different climates in the classrooms, and we had singing and dancing and foods from all over the world in this big event outside in the playground spaces. And that came about in traditional ways, not in kind of a prefabricated way. So, when I used to go to conferences, Anti-Bias curriculum was a very big term used about 20 years ago. And that kind of rolled over into diversity and multiculturalism that has stuck around and the global perspective. And even in the taglines of the university, not right now, but it had been. And the global society and in our mission statement here of the Children's Center is all tied together. So, very much international. And those people that I used to see at conferences, they would weep sometimes – they would cry, because there was no way for someone from Kansas or Minnesota, at that time anyway, to make their classroom authentically multicultural without making it stereotypical. So, if you just kind of dressed up in a costume, that wasn't going to cut it, it was like how you learn about other people from other parts of the world and traditions and things of that such. So, I say, the "I" is completely International, and you have to internalize it, if you want to be a part of it. That's another "I".

APS: That's what I was gonna say. So, you spoke about how important it is to be open to that. Do you feel that your experiences through life prepared you for that, or specifically coming to Miami? Because I know you didn't come from here. So, coming to Miami, being a part of the campus, did that make you more open to understanding and learning the cultures?

LK: I think it's kind of twofold. It was big being here at the university. People's dialects that I listened to or, you know, the funniest things would happen in Spanish sometimes because I can speak some Spanish. And we would have these parties and one time, one of the parents brought a giant jar of some fruit in syrup. And I'd say "Oh, are those figs?" And she says "no, they're "higos". And I go "Higos?" and then maybe she was from Ecuador. So, then I go to one of the other teachers who happens to be from Nicaragua. And I say to her, "Olga, are higos, figs?" and she says "no" and she said some other word. Well, it

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turned out that there are more than one word in Spanish for figs, and we're all talking about figs but none of us is saying the same word for figs. So, it's things like that. And then it's the culture in the Center and the philosophy that – and my way of viewing the world and helping a child become an important part of society. So, we're living in breathing, that type of atmosphere here. So where sometimes the University had a new initiative, it's already something that's in our program. And so, the students would come in at eighteen years of age or the high school students would come in to visit, or an irate parent would be here, and they're very upset about something and culturally, it was a big embarrassment to them. It might not have been to me, and then moving past those first minutes and welcoming them into my office to talk and find out where there was some similarities to have a conversation. All the while, not discounting what it is that they had to say, what they're thinking about, and how we could kind of work together. And so that's kind of my viewpoint.

APS: You totally answered that question. [Laughter] And I think that's really great, especially having a child perspective, it really helps you reflect on how you're treating others when you're working with children. And I've learned that from you. So, based on your experiences with FIU, what are your hopes and dreams for the future of the Center and for campus as a whole?

LK: Wow. As far as the Center goes, it's the support of the administration that will keep the Center going and growing monetarily because the costs are great in childcare, and to support infant care, at some point, which we never have been able to do, it's quite costly. The upkeep of the building is very costly, expanding the building, as the university expands. We, or the Center are like the moms of the university. That's where the nurturing comes from, for all of the children who have the opportunity to come through the doors here. And we can't really help them unless the Center can grow as does the University. However, we're not the law school, we're not the medical school, we're not the football team. . . The children don't vote, so we're not political. It's just something that needs to be supported. So, I would like to see the Center be able to be acknowledged and supported and so that there'd be a stipend for – to help the children go to school here whose parents can afford that. And also, for the brick-and-mortar piece and the cutting edge. Having a dynamic physical presence on campus. So, there can't be sixty children in a preschool for fifty years. And then there are fifty-four or fifty-eight thousand students on campus. So where do they all go? And I think we have a lot to offer a lot of children and then in turn a lot of families because we really help families, as it turns out.

APS: How do we help families at the CCLC?

LK: Because many families who are involved at the University are isolated. They're isolated because they're coming from far away, or they're coming here as PhD students, or maybe they're the first in their family to go to college and maybe they have a child based on their

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past experience before coming to the University. But they know that going to college is really important to get a boost up in life. And so, there are children involved. And we help families because we nurture their parenting skills. You don't – you don't need a book or a map. There's no newborn GPS that guides you on how to do these things. So, we are supportive of that. The way the program operates is that it's kind of endemic in the setting, in the terminology, in the contract, in the handbook, in the way we honor and talk to each other, and the way we treat the parents, so they're having the opportunity to grow along with their child when they come to the Center.

APS: Thank you. So going along right with that, specifically about the children in attendance. You talked a lot about the internationalism of FIU and also how you encourage the children to have a sense of internationalism. So, what do you think makes FIU Children's Center stand out from the rest of the Miami community? So, the children in attendance here, what makes it different?

LK: Well, when the children come here, they usually cry when it's time to go home, not when it's time to come to school. So, there's an indication that there's something special about this space for them. And it's intuitive, it's innate; they understand that. So, they want to be here. And they actually make authentic friendships here because they learn how to talk to each other, how to communicate, and all of their feelings are welcome here. If we had school buses – you know, some schools have school buses with smiley faces on the bus and things like that. And I always used to joke well, what do they do with the unhappy ones? You know, are they allowed to go to school? That kind of a joke. And so, the children here are seeing each other's lunches, looking at the way they toilet themselves, how they greet their own parents, they hear different languages being spoken, and they're so curious. They want to know about those things. So, I had a child in my class one time he was Chinese and one of his little snacks in his lunchbox was – it looked like a little bag of gummy bears, but what it was was dried salted minnows [small fish]. And he opens the bag, and it's his favorite thing, and he's munching away on it. And the other children are – instead of going like, "ew! what is that?", they go, "wow! what's that?" And "we want that," and "where do he get that? We want that to?" You know? So, the exposure without the judging, made such a gigantic difference for all of them. And finding out that those things were okay, the international component was living itself, it was growing itself. It's like a special kind of tree that grew all kinds of fruit on the same tree.

APS: You're the tree? How did you encourage that? Because often in film or in media, or even children you know, they don't have that yearning to learn about other cultures or that openness. So how did you and, you know, the staff here with the philosophy encourage that in the children?

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LK: That's not really easy to answer. So, each person that I hired to come into the Center, came with their own experience and their own view of the world before they came to the Center. But for some reason, the way the Center is built, the way the welcoming design is on the outside, the children's work on the building, so that they're being honored. There's a message there if you're looking around when you walk in the door. So, it's pretty easy for me to know when I was interviewing someone, "okay, this person came here for a job." So now I start to talk to them. And it's quite obvious in the very beginning, where they're kind of coming from. So, the person who had their own philosophy, had had experience with children or personal experience where they could connect to what was happening here; that would be the kind of individual that could become a professional here in this setting. And so, once that happened, we would take each individual's talents and blend them into the atmosphere. So, we were taking the best from everyone and go, "Oh, that's a great idea. Let's, let's use that." And when that would happen, it was honored, and it was put into the curriculum in a sense. What I studied and what the founding director studied, and – hers in child development, mine in early childhood, and my – my interest in all kinds of topics, I shared that with the children, but nothing was ever imposed on them. Okay, it was something they could discover, learn in their own way. You know, and before I retired, I thought I knew how to use every piece of equipment that I collected over time and one of the great things about my job was even to the last year I was teaching, I would see a child use a piece of equipment in a way that I had never seen or maybe I just didn't remember. But honestly, I felt like I had never seen it before, and I honestly say that then "what a great idea!" And it was like, wow! it was like fantastic. But that was part of the joy of my job and having it be open ended so that a child could learn how to think without telling them what to do. They can't ever learn how to think if you just telling them what to do, they just wait around to be told what to do. I'm not sure if I answered that question.

APS: You did. Having – allowing for that openness in all experiences –

LK: Yes, we used to invite children here from other preschools when we would have a winter festival, we had snow. We don't do that so much anymore just because of logistics and legal situations. And the children, they'd look so sad, they look so sad to me, because they weren't – they kind of were walking around with eyes glazed over, they just followed wherever the rest of them went. They didn't know why they were going there. They didn't have a voice. And every one of the children in this Center, I'm sure to this day, has their own voice. And if you can find your voice and then learn how to use it with other people, and be respectful along the way, you know, the sky's the limit, really. Then if you learn how to work with your feelings, that's what makes the children different here.

APS: And you've had the opportunity to see that by seeing students – your students, your children here, come back and work here, you know, come back and attend the University,



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come back as parents of children that you've taught. So, from speaking with them, how has their attendance at the Center change their lives?

LK: Well, I mean, there's so much reinforcement, for me it's so gratifying to see a preschooler come visit on "no-school" days in elementary school, volunteer here in the summer as a teenager, come to attend FIU as a freshman, come here to back to the Center to get a part-time position, graduate with high honors from school, get a great job, maybe meet their spouse on campus or whatever. Maybe yes, maybe no. And then next thing you know, they come, and they say, "I'm pregnant, I'm going to sign my child up to come to the Children's Center." It's so – if you asked me what – why – what was I doing in 1975, [19]85, [19]95, that's like – I didn't not know that these opportunities were just gonna keep on coming. And, and so it's been wonderful. And then, there's – it – you think about nature and nurture but if I was the child's teacher, and the child grew up in the Center, and they continued to come back to the Center, because there was something here for them, they're still learning all of that time, whether it was volunteerism or a part-time job. And they're watching everybody else, responding to everyone else, and in a myriad of different ways. So, they internalize that, and they take that with them onto campus: how they interact with other students on campus, their own professors, how they respond to coursework that they have. They're not sitting there going, "Huh? How long does this have to be? How many pages do I really have to do?" No! they get in there and they do it and they knock it out. They say, "Wow!", what a wonderful experience they've had so they make the most of it. And then they come back as parents, and it's like a different viewpoint. So, it's very lovely, very interesting. And being able to talk to the parents in a philosophical way, or in a child-rearing way, knowing that they had been a child here at the Center. I'm like, I don't know, like a global grandmother or something. Because I just recently went to a nine-year-old's birthday party, because that child and a few of the other children in the class at the time, they made their own little family because they were all isolated from their home countries. And they didn't have people in their neighborhood that they knew that their children could play with because everyone's isolated when you get home. Children aren't in the streets doing those kinds of things that they did back in the 1960s or [19]70s or whatever. So, it's not like that. So, they made themselves a family. And to this day, they – they call me "well, we're all getting together at such and such a park, would you like to join us?" So, I met them recently at the Deering Estate and we just had a lovely afternoon. And they're so solicitous of me and they're so thankful that I had been in their lives, their child's life. It's – It's hugely rewarding. It's amazing.

APS: I can see that in the way that you speak about the Center and from my own experience here [I previously worked with Libby at the Center for several years] and even you coming in for this interview today, how welcoming, and how loving everybody is. You've not just made a family with the children, but with the staff. It's so comfortable. And it's so evident. So, I'm so appreciative that I was able to interview you today –

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LK: It is my pleasure, really.

APS: And to listen to your story. And thank you.

LK: You're welcome, Alex.

[Break in recording]

LK: I feel like I'm five years old. Just because I'm just having a blast.

[End of interview]

Transcribed by: Alexandria Pipitone Schworn, March 15, 2022.