

When kids cry out, she gets the call

By Keith O'Brien, Globe Correspondent | December 19, 2005

For most people, appearing in an Oscar-nominated documentary would be a pretty big deal, maybe one of the finest moments of a career. Not Nancy Rappaport. She lists that honor at the very end of her 12-page résumé.

It's not that she isn't proud of the film, "The Children's Storefront," a 1988 documentary about the school where she taught in Harlem. It's just that Rappaport has other, bigger responsibilities. As an assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and the director of school programs for the Cambridge Health Alliance, Rappaport, 46, works with school nurses and social workers in Cambridge, helping children often in the worst of times. When children act out, fall apart, make threats, or simply trouble teachers with their behavior, Rappaport often gets the call. It's her job to make sure they get the mental care they need.

"I do tend to be invited in at some of the more chaotic points in kid's lives," she said. "I see my job as trying to galvanize resources and being really inquisitive about why are we stuck right now. . . . Where is the breakdown?"

Rappaport didn't have to take this path. She comes from a prominent Boston family. One of her brothers once ran for lieutenant governor. Another makes multimillion-dollar real estate deals. Rappaport could have taken her psychiatry degree and set up a lucrative practice, counseling folks from a comfortable chair in a quiet, peaceful office.

That, however, would have bored Rappaport to tears, she says. A self-described adrenaline junkie, she has always been attracted to challenges, to tough cases. She gets plenty of them these days: the boy who cuts himself, the student who destroyed a classroom, the parents who insist their troubled child is fine.

"The stakes," she says, "are really high."

Her job works like this: Rappaport meets weekly with school nurses and clinical social workers in Cambridge. They talk about mental health issues students might be having and how they should approach certain cases. Rappaport sits at the table, engaged, inquisitive. She wants to know why one student lies and another's grades are dropping. She asks questions: "Is there a father? . . . How's she doing in school? . . . Why was there a crisis yesterday?"

Brow furrowed, a stack of files before her, Rappaport takes notes. She will meet and treat some of the students herself and helps her colleagues come up with approaches for others.

And while these cases will run the gamut, what concerns Rappaport most is teen depression and suicide. It's more prevalent than people know, Rappaport wrote recently with colleagues in the *Journal of Pediatrics*. She said some 30 percent of US high school students feel so sad at some point that they stop their usual activities, yet only one in 10 pediatricians feels prepared to treat depression, and 80 percent of troubled teens never receive the right care.

What makes matters worse, says Rappaport, is the confusion about when a child should take antidepressant medications and reports that these medications may increase the risk of suicidal thoughts in some children. "I think -- and I've heard this from pediatricians -- that there's more concern now about treating depression with antidepressants, which I can appreciate," she says. "I think we should be extremely cautious with using medications."

But Rappaport believes these medications -- selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, or SSRIs,

like Prozac -- can also aid patients and may have helped reduce teen suicide numbers in recent years. She urges families to weigh the risks and the rewards.

Some parents are desperate by the time they come to see Rappaport and her colleagues. Some, she says, want to help their child so much that they would "move Mount Everest with a fork." Others aren't aware of what's happening with their children, and that's where Rappaport comes in.

What Rappaport likes, she says, is that sometimes she gets to change children's lives, and that's far more fulfilling to her than any fancy Hollywood award.

"I'm not a boutique psychiatrist," she said.

FACT SHEET

Home: Born and raised in Boston, she lives in Cambridge.

Family: Her father, Jerry Rappaport, is a real estate developer and philanthropist who founded with his family the Jerome Lyle Rappaport Charitable Foundation in 1997. She is married to architect Colin Flavin, and they have three children, ages 10 to 15.

Education: Earned a bachelor's degree in English from Princeton University in 1982 and a medical degree from Tufts University in 1988.

Going the distance: Rappaport has run in seven marathons over the years and runs about 40 miles a week, she says. It's a hobby that helps her focus, she says, after long and sometimes hectic days.

Personality: "You've got to talk fast to keep up with her," says Mara Bentman, a clinical social worker at Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School. "She's wired."

Her science: Suicide is the third-leading cause of death in teenagers, most often preceded by depression. It often goes undetected and untreated, Rappaport says. She urges doctors and families to be more mindful of the symptoms and to approach medications with "cautious scrutiny."

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