

# The actions of one inspire the power of many

## Laura Briley, Day Schools, Tulsa, Oklahoma

by Janet Gonzalez-Mena

Laura Briley is a person who makes things happen! Not only is she instrumental in creating a new World Forum Working Group for the Rights of Children in Children's Homes, but in April she organized the first ever Pikler Intensive Training in the United States by bringing two internationally famous infant development experts to Tulsa, Oklahoma. But that's getting ahead of the story. Let's go back to the start of the story in the 1970s.

Laura was a young woman with a business background when she began her career in child care. She was a hands-on learner with no formal background in child development, but always looked for ways that she could improve the five schools she had purchased from her brother. She had heard Magda Gerber give several presentations about infant care at several NAEYC conferences and thus began her deep desire to improve care for infants and toddlers. Magda made an impact on everyone she met and her approach to infant care was profound and passionate. Laura was convinced that the educaring approach was something that would benefit infants, but had no idea that there would be a connection between Magda and her work in Tulsa.

"Pikler Intensive I Training," Day Schools Temple Campus, Tulsa, Oklahoma



In 1990 Laura visited Romania on a vacation to Eastern Europe. She saw firsthand what Ceauscescu (the dictator) had done to the country and its children. Over 100,000 children were placed in orphanages because their families were not able to provide for them. These children were called 'irrecoverables' and 'throwaway children.' She saw this desperate situation and was determined to help. Laura took supplies to Orphanage #5 and convinced Dr. Dinca, the orphanage doctor, to allow her to open a school there. She wrote an article in *Exchange* magazine (March/April 1991) about her project. As a result, volunteers joined her

and they went to Romania and the plan was implemented.

Laura worked in Romania for almost five years, traveling back and forth between Tulsa and Bucharest, operating the schools in Tulsa and Orphanage #5. In her time there, Laura was able to put in a playground for the Romanian children, integrated community children with the children in the orphanage, and opened a kindergarten in a state-run kindergarten. She saw a need, did something about it, and involved others in creating change — a theme in Laura's life!

Of particular concern was the poor care that the infants received in the orphanages in Romania. They were left in cribs, never held, and never attended to other than in assembly-line fashion. Karen Miller directed, "You have to go to the Pikler Institute in Budapest, Hungary." Karen was an infant/toddler specialist and writer and had heard from Magda Gerber about Pikler's approach for caring for infants and toddlers. Magda Gerber's approach to infant care had started in Budapest, Hungary, with training and expertise from Dr. Emmi Pikler, a pediatrician, researcher, and theorist whose name and picture belong in child development books right alongside Piaget, Vygotsky, and Erikson.

Laura traveled to Budapest from Romania and took Romanians from the Ministry of Health and Education to see the residential nursery home and training/research center. Laura became passionate about this approach after she saw it first hand and the possibilities of improving lives of children throughout the world.

Anna Tardos, Pikler's daughter, now directs the Institute. A relationship between Laura and Tardos and her colleague, Agnes Szanto, both psychologists continues today, already 18 years. Szanto and Tardos are the internationally famous infant development experts who taught the first Pikler Intensive Training in Tulsa in April of this year. (They will be coming back to Tulsa next April for Intensive II training.)

When the General Secretary of the International Pikler Association (AIPL), Istvan Szanto suggested the need for a Pikler identity in the United States, Laura formed the nonprofit "Pikler/Loczy Fund USA" (PLUSA). Focusing on helping more professionals understand the usefulness of the Piklerian approach in child care and in orphanages around the world.

A board of directors, committed to the mission of the Pikler Fund, have put in countless hours to help raise awareness about Pikler through fundraising and training efforts. In 2003, when Laura discovered that the Pikler Institute was in tough financial straits, Laura worked with Alexandra Curtis Boyer (a PLUSA board member) and the AIPL (the International Pikler Association) to hold a fundraiser in Budapest featuring Alex's father, actor Tony Curtis, whose family roots are in Hungary. She also organized a 2005 study tour to the Pikler Institute in Budapest for 60 infant/toddler specialists from the United States.

As a person deeply concerned about orphanages, Laura was instrumental in organizing a workshop focused on children in institutions at the World Forum in Kuala Lumpur, where 50 people from around the world came together in that session to share their experiences in running orphanages. That coming together resulted in a training that Laura organized with the World Forum Foundation at the Pikler Institute in Budapest in 2007. With the support of the USA Fund and other supporters of the Pikler Institute, the Institute's work continues in Budapest today.

One of the first members of the Pikler board was Elsa Chahin, a RIE Associate from México, who now lives in the United States. Elsa recently began assisting Anna Tardos with trainings both in the U.S. and in Hungary. Janet Gonzalez-Mena joined the board in 2004 and assisted in the Pikler/Loczy Fund exhibit booths at NAEYC conferences. She also helped organize a conference in California that featured Ute Strub, who has worked in Budapest with Anna Tardos, and who runs a children's home based on

Piklerian principles in Berlin, Germany. Beverly Kovach, who studied with Magda Gerber and has been deeply involved in early care and education for years, has put countless days and hours working and training on the Pikler approach and has dedicated her life to infants and toddlers and their caregivers. She recently co-authored *Being with Babies* (Gryphon House, 2008).

At the 2009 World Forum in Belfast, Northern Ireland, it was decided that the new World Forum Working Group for the Rights of Children in Children's Homes would be launched with the mission to connect orphanages around the world and support them and the work that they are doing for children. It was also decided that a book about their experiences with orphanages would be published. The book would have a much-needed list of principles on how to organize institutions for young children that give them what they

PHOTOGRAPH BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER



need to become healthy, stable, and productive citizens.

This Working Group is determined to meet with the United Nations to talk about the rights of children who live in these institutions. An initial step was made last November when Beverly Kovach and Laura met with the Ambassador of Belize in Washington, DC, to discuss the needs of the Liberty orphanage in Belize that Delfena Mitchell directs.

Liberty is a children's home for those whose families cannot care for them; they are social orphans. Delfena, a retired U.S. Navy nurse, is a member of the Working Group and is Belize's national representative at the World Forum. Delfena attended the training at the Pikler Institute in Budapest and was also part of the recent Pikler Intensive in Tulsa.

Not only has Laura invested time outside of Tulsa, but continues to focus on early care in her native city. The 4 Day Schools in Tulsa are NAEYC accredited and have received the state's 3 Star certification. These achievements have only been possible because of family support, Day Schools' management team,

and the dedicated team of caregivers. She continues to work within the Tulsa community in providing infant/toddler training by partnering with other local providers including the public schools, colleges, and resource centers. Community Playthings has assisted by providing furniture and equipment for a demonstration training center in Tulsa, as well as funding support for PLUSA. Last year, Laura co-chaired an International Infant/Toddler conference in Tulsa. Another International Infant/Toddler conference will be held in Tulsa, April 14-16, 2011.

Laura strives for quality and knows that one person cannot do it alone. It takes a commitment and people who believe in what you are doing. She recognizes each individual who has helped along the road and is thankful that they have been put in her path. It hasn't been easy. But, it's important to keep making an effort. "What does it cost you? If you don't dream and try, you will never know what could have been."

This article represents just a glimpse at some of the people whose lives and work have been touched by Laura Briley. One person can create a worldwide web of interconnectedness that goes far beyond that of the children, families, and staff in a

community. A person who sees a need and steps forward to do something about it can bring along others and provoke them to action. The web of action continues to spread, involving so many who are working for the good of children and families at home and abroad.

If you are interested in learning more about this work or would like to help, please visit [www.pikler.org](http://www.pikler.org) or [www.dayschoolsok.com](http://www.dayschoolsok.com) or contact Laura at: [lbriley@dayschoolsok.com](mailto:lbriley@dayschoolsok.com).

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