

*Population and Reproductive Health
Oral History Project*

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Peggy Curlin

Interviewed by
Deborah McFarlane

May 13 and 15, 2003
Washington, D.C.

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Narrator

Peggy Curlin (1940–2005) was president of the Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA), a non-governmental agency that continues to provide leadership and management training to women involved in reproductive health throughout the world. Prior to joining CEDPA, in 1974 Ms. Curlin co-founded Concerned Women, a women's health and family planning organization in Bangladesh that began by distributing contraceptives to poor women in Dhaka.

Interviewer

Deborah R. McFarlane is professor of political science at the University of New Mexico. She is the author, with K.J. Meier, of *The Politics of Fertility Control: Family Planning and Abortion Politics in the American States* (Congressional Quarterly Press, 2001). McFarlane worked as an administrator and a consultant in reproductive health in the U.S. and internationally for more than three decades.

Restrictions

None

Format

Four 60-minute audiocassettes.

Transcript

Transcribed, audited and edited at Baylor University. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Peggy Curlin.

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Audio Recording

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Transcript

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McFarlane I'm here at CEDPA [Centre for Development and Population Activities] with Peggy Curlin, the president and Peggy, I'd just like you to say on tape that you agree to be interviewed for your oral history.

Curlin I do agree, and I'm very flattered to be asked.

McFarlane Let's start at the beginning, where you were born, and describe where you're from.

Curlin I was born in Appalachia in Harlan, Kentucky, which has been known, perhaps not proudly, as Bloody Harlan, because of labor wars during the thirties and early forties when the unions came in to try to organize coal miners. One of the claims to fame is John Dos Passos visited Harlan during this time and was almost ridden out of town on a rail because he was a member of either the Socialist or the Communist party. I grew up with a very colorful history even though Appalachia is the poorest part of our own country. I grew up in a joint family so, that my feeling of privacy was having one's own bed. Because of economic reasons I grew up in a household with my grandparents, my parents, my aunt, and my cousin, a familiar story in that part of Kentucky.

McFarlane What was your maiden name?

Curlin McDowell.

McFarlane Okay. How many siblings?

Curlin None.

McFarlane No siblings.

Curlin No siblings.

McFarlane But a big household. Tell me about your parents.

Curlin My father went to college where he met and married my mother who was still in high school. His older brother had been before him but he was the second in the family who went to college. My dynamic grandmother who was only 4'10", married my papa who was 6'2", felt that the only way out of the coal mines was to get an education and for that reason she sacrificed a lot for her boys. She had a girl, my aunt, and she really did not do as much for her and as a matter of fact my aunt contributed, by working, to the boys' education.

McFarlane That was still tough wasn't it, and unusual?

Curlin Yes, I mean this was during the Depression that the boys in the family were educated. My father did economics and philosophy which was an interesting combination for that day and age I think.

McFarlane And did your grandfather work in a coal mine?

Curlin He came to that part of the country because he was a carpenter. And the deep shaft mines required tipples. The coal comes out of the mountain and shoots down to where it can be sorted and loaded. And his job was to build and oversee those tipples.

McFarlane A tipple was a?

Curlin It is a—how can I explain this? It is a runway for coal when it comes out of the mountain, then it falls down this tippie and is sorted and washed before then it's loaded usually on railroad cars and shipped. But he also was a supervisor in the mines at a later date. But he was an early retiree and he was really the caregiver for my cousin and I. She's five years older than I. Because my grandmother was a joiner, she was the state president of the WCTU, she was always off on conferences. She was very big in the women's wing of the Masons called the Eastern Star. Granny had terribly high energy levels and Papa was very laid back and he sat on the porch and rocked and watched the children.

McFarlane Now, was your mother working at this time?

Curlin Yes, everybody else was working. And my mother worked all her life. And, of course, my father did and my aunt did, my cousin Sarah and I had no other caregivers. There weren't babysitters in that era. It really worked out quite well.

McFarlane And where was your mother from?

Curlin About sixty miles from Harlan, from Williamsburg, Kentucky, which is a very nice little town. At one time it had more millionaires per capita than any other town in the United States.

McFarlane Why?

Curlin Coal. It had beautiful churches and things had been donated by the coal barons. Her family was from really further back in the country, Jellico Creek. Her mother's greatest passion was to move to town. And so, eventually they did get to town but they always sort of lived like they were still back in the

country. They had a cow and chickens and a big garden. They were really quite wonderful people. My mother was one of nine children. And her mother never raised her voice. She was a saintly little person who would much rather be in the garden than cleaning house. (laughs)

McFarlane So, where did your parents meet?

Curlin In Williamsburg. [It] has a Baptist college called Cumberland College, and my father came down there to go to school.

McFarlane Oh, okay. And then after college he moved back to Harlan?

Curlin He went then to a state university in Morehead, Kentucky. He and Mother married. Mother was seventeen and I think Dad was twenty or twenty-one. They lived in Morehead until she became pregnant. And then she came back to her mother's and lost the baby. So, ten years later I came along. My father taught way out in the country and they lived way out in the country. And that was a very good job during the Depression. He was earning more than you would in the mines.

McFarlane So, by the time you come along are they still out in the country?

Curlin No, they're in town and my father is teaching in a local high school, teaching mathematics.

McFarlane Okay, so, you basically grew up in a small town.

Curlin Yes, it is smaller today than it was then. It was about five thousand then. But it was very rich in culture. The bank owner had been to the Sorbonne to study organ. My music teacher had been to Julliard to study the piano. And there were lots of intelligencia in the town whose forbearers were coal barons. They had stayed in Harlan to manage their families' property. I was

in no way deprived of that kind of influence.

McFarlane Did you go to school with people of different means?

Curlin Oh, yes. We all went to the same city school. There was a difference between those that went to county schools and those who went to city schools. And the city school considered itself a much better educational opportunity. And we had lots of different people of different means in the school. But at the time I went to school no blacks went to the school. It was not integrated.

McFarlane So there were blacks in town?

Curlin Very much so. And my father was a very good friend of the principal of the Rosenwald School, which was the black high school.

McFarlane Was that an unusual friendship?

Curlin Harlan is a very interesting study in sociology because blacks were not the bottom of the social ladder. It was poor whites that wouldn't work. And they were looked down on to a much greater degree than blacks who had jobs, who did work, many of them in the mines. And in the mines, in the coal camps, of course, they lived side by side and they did go to the same schools, I believe.

McFarlane Blacks and whites?

Curlin In the coal camps.

McFarlane Interesting. The parental roles in your family, how did your parents relate to each other? Your father's educated, your mom's not.

Curlin My mother had more common sense than anybody else in the family. She was a decision maker and a very strong person. She had strongly held views and she and my father had a good partnership.

McFarlane And he's the quieter—

Curlin More reserved and shy and she was very outgoing.

McFarlane What about your religious upbringing?

Curlin Presbyterian all the way. And the whole family was Presbyterian and we went to the Presbyterian church in Harlan where I'm still close. It makes me feel that that's really my home in that church and in the town although I don't have living relatives in the town any longer.

McFarlane That's something you kept with you all your life?

Curlin Yes, yes.

McFarlane What did the Presbyterian upbringing give you?

Curlin Well, I memorized any number of Bible verses. (laughter) I can find various passages in the Bible by just flipping through. At that time it wasn't theology that you were educated in but just rote learning about Bible stories and so forth. At one point, when I was confirmed, joined the church, at twelve, our pastor told my father that I would make a wonderful missionary but that he knew my father would not want me to be a missionary. My father was so offended but, of course, he wouldn't have wanted me to because they really didn't want me to go to the state capital let alone to some foreign country.

McFarlane So, he was protective of you?

Curlin Yes, yes. My mother also. My mother was more provincial than my dad. She just saw no use in anybody traveling anywhere. And my father was more adventuresome and when he got into the—labor negotiations in the coal industry, he did travel a great deal to Washington and to the state capital. He was very satisfied with his job and he was very revered in his job.

McFarlane Tell me about that, the labor negotiation.

Curlin Well, he represented mine owners in not just labor negotiations but in federal regulations of mines. He started a health and safety program for the mines and when he retired he started a Women Miner's Supervision course because by that time women were allowed to go in the mines. When I was growing up it was considered bad luck, that somebody was going to die, if a woman went into the mines.

McFarlane When did that change or when did—

Curlin Well, I don't know exactly the date but I would say in the sixties if not later. And the women were allowed to go in the mines and mine but—it also changed when mining became high tech, where you weren't just going in with a pick and shovel but you were using these machines that sort of ate the coal out of the seam, threw it back over your shoulder into a cart. You were lying down most of the time because the pick was quite short. It wasn't at all about height. It wasn't high enough to stand up in most cases. But these women faced two problems. One is they never got promoted and secondly they were harassed on the job. And my father ran the first course that talked about supervision and sexual harassment. He brought some lawyers down from Washington to talk about sexual harassment.

McFarlane This was in the sixties?

Curlin Seventies. And then they gave women the supervisory skills so that they were more competitive with men. So, he always wanted women to have opportunities, though he volunteered all his life with the Boy Scouts. I guess that was his substitution for having only one girl. But he became the state

Boy Scout leader. And he built the Boy Scout camp and he was quite a public minded person. He built the airport. It was built by cutting off the top of a mountain. So, if you didn't take off in the plane you just went right over the side. (laughs)

McFarlane He's a mathematics teacher who built an airport?

Curlin That was after he became a manager. And he had the ability to get other people to organize to do something good for the community.

McFarlane What did your—how did your parents—what was their attitude toward education for you?

Curlin Well, that's a good question. Mother used to resent my reading. If you weren't up doing something active like cleaning house, you were just wasting time. But my father really encouraged it. But not to the point where I got a very rigorous degree. There was not much talk about what I would do after I was out of school.

McFarlane Out of high school?

Curlin Out of college. That I would go to college was a foregone conclusion.

McFarlane Never thought about otherwise?

Curlin No, never. Also I never thought about a job except maybe teaching. And the thought was always that I would come back to Harlan.

McFarlane So you went—you graduated from high school in Harlan?

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane And then you went to college.

Curlin At Centre College which is a very good liberal arts school in central Kentucky in Danville, Kentucky.

McFarlane How far away from home?

Curlin A hundred miles.

McFarlane And tell me about going to college, leaving Harlan.

Curlin Well, my cousin, Sarah, had been there before me and had a brilliant career at Centre, and she was much more academically inclined than I was, and I had a brilliant career in boyfriends. (laughter) I have to confess to you.

McFarlane All four years?

Curlin Oh, yes. (laughter) Two weeks after I graduated, I married. So, I did end up with the right one of the many that I dated during that time. But it was a wonderful school because it was 450 students when I went there. And you really got to know your professors and you were invited home with them to dinner and several of them have made a big impact on me. I just received an honorary doctorate from Centre last year. Last spring.

McFarlane That means a lot.

Curlin It does. Better than Harvard. (laughs) But at the time I went to Centre there were a lot of people from outside the state. Not so much anymore. Their mission is to educate the brightest of Kentucky students. But, at that time, I think they had a broader admissions policy and were really reaching out for different kinds of people. Although, again, it was not desegregated. It was segregated when I went there until about two years after I had graduated.

McFarlane And you graduated when?

Curlin In '62.

McFarlane You met your husband at Centre College.

Curlin He was my chemistry lab professor—not professor, he was the lab assistant

in the chemistry department and if it hadn't been for him, I would still be at Centre College taking freshmen chemistry. I couldn't tell you how bread rose. (laughter) I had gotten through high school with not one single science course. And so, I had a terrible time with it when I went to college because you had to take it. And I did philosophy, following my father's footsteps, and did very well in philosophy. And I did the arts related to home economics, which was great fun. We made costumes for plays and did color and design, food nutrition. It was a wonderful course and the professor, the head of the department, taught four of us and was a wonderful role model. She was the most dignified woman that I've ever known and she later became dean of women at Centre. And she had wonderful management skills.

McFarlane And so was this your major?

Curlin I had a double major in philosophy and the arts related to home economics.

McFarlane That's unique isn't it?

Curlin Well, not at Centre. You're encouraged to pursue your own thing. And I have a lot of English courses. I had a very strong English minor.

McFarlane Did you have any idea what you would do after?

Curlin None whatsoever. Marriage. (laughter) Pretty foregone conclusion. And I went to school with some very smart and terrific women. And I don't recall ever hearing the word career. People were going to get jobs but there was never any thought that there would be a career that would last you your life time. You were going to get a job until you got married. If you weren't getting married the day after schools out. And it's hard to believe and maybe

in bigger schools there was more emphasis on career than there was at Centre.

McFarlane So two weeks after college you get married?

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane And now what?

Curlin Well, then George, my husband, was in medical school.

McFarlane He was already in.

Curlin He was already in and he had finished his first year and starting on his second year. We married in June. He started on his second year in September. And I got a job teaching in a little country school, eight rooms, eight grades, eight teachers. All women but the teacher of the eighth grade who was a man. He had been assistant coach at the University of Tennessee and he was like Attila the Hun. We were all terrified of him, not only the kids. For example, the floor was done in white rubber tiles and around the baseboard there were dark tiles and it was a killing offense to step on the dark tile because then you might put your hand on the wall. And I was the first non-Church of Christ teacher that they ever hired.

McFarlane At a public school?

Curlin Yes, oh, yes, a public school. And I was supposed to sign a contract that said I would not drink, but I knew this was not going to be possible. So, I just never turned that contract in. At the end of the year when I quit, I never had a contract to begin with. You also had to pray, and that was after the Supreme Court ruling on school prayer, and I refused to do that so, I made the kids put their heads down for two minutes. And if you went past the

door you'd think they were praying but they weren't. It was a very interesting experience because it was really my first run in with a very conservative society because my parents in Harlan had been Republican. And at that time the Republican party was liberal on social issues and conservative on fiscal issues. And there was hardly a person in town who was a Democrat.

McFarlane In Harlan?

Curlin I grew up very much influenced by the party of Lincoln and Lincoln was a little bit closer to us than he would have been in most states. And my forbearers fought for the North in the Civil War.

McFarlane From Kentucky?

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane Okay. So why did you quit?

Curlin I got pregnant.

McFarlane It's 1963 and you quit, and you had your first child in 1963?

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane Tell me about that.

Curlin Well, my daughter, Meg, was born in Vanderbilt Hospital and my only fear was that I would have that baby while George's class was still on rotations for OBGYN. Actually I avoided having her until the twenty-third of December, when everybody was gone for the holidays. And she was born with her eyes open. She was one of those babies that was taking in everything. We were living in an attic apartment and had virtually no money—

Tape 1, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.

Curlin But everybody else was poor too. Vanderbilt, at that time, had fifty-two students in a class. Two were women although there was no quota but there were always two women. And there were very few married students, very few. I would guess no more than four or five out of the class were married. And it was hard because of the nights and weekends at the hospital. It was hard for both of us because suddenly I went from having a job and being with people all the time to being pretty much isolated.

McFarlane So that's how you finished out medical school? Anymore children in medical school?

Curlin No, not in medical school. When my husband did an internship in Kentucky, at the University of Kentucky, which was quite good then he knew that he would probably be drafted to go to Vietnam. And he tried to join the service so that he would—he could start with the military in July. If you did not get out of the military until August, you had to wait a whole year for a rotation. So, he tried to join so he could be out by July. At that time they had an overabundance of doctors so somebody suggested the CDC. And he applied and was taken in immediately and we moved to Atlanta.

McFarlane And what year was this?

Curlin This would be '66.

McFarlane Sixty-six, and has he finished the residency?

Curlin He did that in Baltimore after the CDC two year stint. So, his training was not really in a straight line. But this CDC thing, they used to call it the yellow berets. So, it was a way to serve your military service. And that's when he became really entranced with epidemiology. It was a wonderful life changing

experience for him. And he'd always been drawn to public health but nobody else in his whole class was. They all wanted to go back to some little town and practice medicine and make a lot of money. And so, when he got to the CDC he felt that he was indeed home. And, of course, I was doing the same thing. You know, I was staying home with little Meg and not doing very much because he traveled all the time. And that while he was at CDC he traveled to Bangladesh for four months for a big cholera outbreak.

McFarlane Without you?

Curlin Definitely without me. And he left—he found out Friday afternoon after the banks closed, I remember that he would go on Sunday. And he went with twelve dollars in his pocket which was the only—the size of the check we could cash at the liquor store. But he was just entranced with Bangladesh. He had such a good time, I mean both personally and professionally. Professionally it was so rich.

McFarlane Did that peak your interest?

Curlin Yes, he came home full of enthusiasm—that if anything ever came up that we should go and live out there. And then he went to Hopkins for his residency and during that time we had a son. When Mac [George McDowell Curlin], our youngest, was fourteen months old, we went to Bangladesh. There was a job available and it was with the CDC so we didn't have to change institutes.

McFarlane So this is 1970?

Curlin No, in 1969.

McFarlane That you moved to Bangladesh?

Curlin Yes. We went together in July and we went through the Orient where he did a week's work with a laboratory in Taiwan in Taipei and then we went to Japan. And we were then told that we couldn't enter the country as the— there were too many Americans there and the ambassador had to keep the numbers at a certain level.

McFarlane Because of what?

Curlin Because that was the agreed upon level of Americans that could be there by the Bangladesh government. So, until somebody left we couldn't go. And it was wonderful because we got to travel at the government's expense. I mean they had to pay for us to wait it out.

McFarlane So, you traveled where?

Curlin Well, we spent time in Japan and then went through Singapore and went to Bangkok and spent most of our time in Thailand.

McFarlane This is your first—

Curlin This is my first time outside the country.

McFarlane What are you thinking?

Curlin Well, I have always been very adaptable. I didn't find anything shocking and I wasn't afraid of anything. And with the little kids you're still doing a lot of the same things that you did at home. You're taking care of the baby and changing the diaper. So, it was in these romantic places. It was a wonderful experience because we stayed in very good hotels and just had a blast. We did all the touristy things you could do.

McFarlane And how long were you in this kind of limbo state?

Curlin About a month, maybe five weeks. And then we went to Bangladesh and

arrived the first of July. And on the fourth of July the ambassador gave a picnic kind of thing at the local hotel and served shrimp and everybody who ate it were sick as a dog except for me. So I knew I was going to be alright.

McFarlane And you ate the shrimp?

Curlin I ate the shrimp. People really were sick. And I loved Dhaka. It was very rural looking. A lot of open spaces and huge bodies of water. You know, in Bangladesh five rivers come together at the delta in Bangladesh. And when we arrived in Dhaka, the banks of the rivers had flooded and we had to get into our house using stools. We were picked up by jeeps, but the water was only about an inch from flooding our house. But it was still wonderful—and the flowers were out of this world, just beautiful.

McFarlane So this was exciting for you?

Curlin Very much so.

McFarlane And what was your life like when you first got there?

Curlin Well, I was sort of adopted by the senior West Pakistani women because I was interested in gardening and I was always asking for suggestions of what to do and so, they took me under their wing. Also, I played good bridge. (laughs) Bridge has come in handy more than once in my life. And I got to know the international community quite well because there were very, very few Americans there then. And the children learned to swim in the local Gymcana club. And there was no American club. It was a wonderful time to get to know both the country and get to know a very wonderful group of people. Some of them had been there their entire lives. Some of them were Anglo-Indians—some Armenians who had either been born there or have

been brought there very shortly after they've been born.

McFarlane And your husband is working in cholera at this point?

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane Now, how did you make the transition from gardening into public health?

Curlin Well, it was—as usual a dramatic call. In 1970 a great natural disaster struck Bangladesh. A cyclone overnight killed half the people, about 300,000 people, in the Char Islands in the Bay of Bengal. And it was interesting that even in those days it only took eighty-five days to replace them. So the population pressure was growing even at that time.

McFarlane Where you aware of that?

Curlin That was the first time I became aware of that. You'd go places and there would be crowds and all of the kids. I never got the big picture of how the population pressure was building until that fact came out. So, I, along with several American women, organized a save Monpura Island adventure. We got food from the Red Cross in Dhaka and shipped them to an island which had lost half its population. And the husbands, like George, went to Monpura by boat thinking that there would be a lot of medical problems. Actually there weren't because all of the weak and the old had been washed away and people had been up in palm trees holding on and where they were holding on had abrasions. Most of the women had been washed away and the first thing that the men ask for was wives. (laughs) Would we please organize women and bring them? Because they never had cooked a meal. They never had boiled rice. So it was a very interesting experience and it was so affecting to all of us, and it did change our lives. One of our fellow

volunteers was Fasje Abed, who was then the director of one of the big oil companies, a British citizen but Bangladesh born. And he was so affected that he quit his job as a very highly paid executive and founded a group called BRAC which is now one of the most famous NGO groups in Bangladesh. But we all worked together in the beginning in an organization called HELP Monpura.

McFarlane Is that the group that went down to the island?

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane Tell me a little bit about how this gets organized.

Curlin Well, it was a fabulous experience because our role in Dhaka was to liberate relief supplies and to get them transported to our island, to this Monpura. And that was not an easy job. The Red Cross had their, as they say, “go down” for the storage for the relief groups that were coming in from all over the place in old Dhaka. You could barely get an ox cart through the streets let alone a truck. And the foreign head of the Red Cross who was brought in to organize things had a nervous breakdown and had to be medically evacuated. (laughter) I mean it was one big mess. Just persistence in getting to know the people who mattered, which were the little guys who loaded the trucks, we were able to get supplies out. And we also had transportation planned—we made friends with the Soviet helicopter pilots and they would take our goods. The U.S. sent the Strike Command. And so there was a big military presence there too. But the Soviets were much more accommodating than the Americans.

McFarlane The “we” that organized this, who are you?

Curlin Oh, about six people.

McFarlane Women?

Curlin Yes, wives of the doctors at the cholera lab and some Bengalis like Abed and others. Abed had a wonderful situation because he lived in Chitigong and so we could take all the goods or some of it by road to Chitigong and then it could go by boat to Monpura.

McFarlane Were you sitting around and decided you needed to do something?

Curlin Well, it took about ten days for the magnitude of that cyclone to reach Dhaka. I mean there was hardly any news from those islands anyway and another lesson in population was that those islands had never historically been inhabited year round. They'd been used only to grow a rice crop but the population pressure had pushed people down into those Char Islands. Char meaning it's here today gone tomorrow. It's the alluvial silt that comes down from these big rivers and piles up and makes an island but next year it could be gone. So, it's a very interesting area, but not habitable, and people had never tried to inhabit that until the seventies. And the other lesson I learned was how to operate the system in Bangladesh.

McFarlane Tell me about that.

Curlin Well, you did it on grace and favor. There were not many hard and fast rules, but if you could be patient and charming, you could get about anything you wanted to get done because when you had to have somebody sign off on something, you just walked in and waited. I mean, I am a great waiter and I always say, "I learned patience in Bangladesh more than any other single lesson." It was at that time a small enough city so that you could get to know

people and in that way it was very much like Kentucky because that's exactly how you get things done in Kentucky, too.

McFarlane So after the catastrophe did you just keep going?

Curlin No, then there was a war. In 1971—there was an election at the end of '70. There had been trouble between East and West Pakistan for years. And it started in 1954 with the language riots because the West Pakistanis who were ruling both sides of Pakistan after partition declared Urdu as the official language but not everyone in West Pakistan spoke Urdu, let alone in Bengal. Bengali, at that time and I expect it is true today, is the fifth largest language grouping in the world when you count Bangladesh and West Bengal in India. And here these people were declaring an entirely different language as the lingua franca of the country. The students at the university brought out in a procession and four of them were killed. That started a continuing animosity between East and West. But in seventy a Bengali, Sheik Mujapur Rahman, legitimately won the election. Of course, there are more Bengalis in East Pakistan than there are in West Pakistan by far. And Bhutto was the West Pakistani who ran in the election, whose daughter has also been prime minister, and he did not accept the election and the army declared a crackdown. They sent in soldiers. And it was probably the worst nightmare that I'd ever been through because it was a surprise attack—we'd been out to a party and coming home we'd seen these convoy of trucks and wondered what was going on and then about one o'clock in the morning they started shelling. And they were shelling the police station very close to our house. The mortar fire broke out our windows. And, of course I was terrified for

the children. My first thought was that we'll get them on a country boat and send them with the servants to the village. That's the only way we can save them. And it's still an awful feeling to believe you can't save them but other people might be able to and you will trust them completely to other people. We saw some really awful things and we had friends at the university, who were teaching at the university, and we went to see about their flat because the Germans evacuated much earlier than the Americans. There was a tilt towards Pakistan because Nixon's trip to China was negotiated by the Pakistanis with China. So the U.S. said everything was normal. At the University the Bengali professors had been lined up in the hall on the steps and shot. And there was blood caked in the floor.

McFarlane

You saw this?

Curlin

Yes. And there were bodies in the street. We lived across a lake from a village and about the fourth day of the crackdown they came and marched off every man in that village and we thought they were going to shoot them. And we went up on the roof and started taking video. We had a home movie projector and two soldiers pointed guns at us. It was incredibly frightening. The servants were very upset and our son was only about three and a half and he didn't understand what was happening. He just knew that everybody was crying. He was affected for years about people in uniform. I can't tell you how many days I spent sitting in firemen's trucks and police cars trying to de-traumatize that child. But we were finally, after I think ten or twelve days, evacuated, and taken to the airport, allowed one suitcase apiece. We waited on the tarmac and the flight came in from West Pakistan and it was

full of soldiers that the U.S. had paid for. These soldiers came on the plane which would evacuate us to Pakistan. And we were met in Karachi by people at our embassy who said, "Maybe you just need something to help you sleep or maybe you just need to see a psychiatrist." They just didn't really want this story out.

McFarlane How many of you were American?

Curlin There must have been two hundred.

McFarlane But you went back to Bangladesh after that?

Curlin No, we were then evacuated to our safe haven, Iran. It was very fortunate for me in one way because I'd probably never have seen Iran. George got sent to a medical meeting in the States and they wouldn't let him come back because they said, "Well, you're safer in the States." And I had to serve out his time which was until July.

McFarlane With the children?

Curlin With the children in one hotel room in Tehran. And every day I would take them rug shopping because they could climb up on stacks of rugs and jump. That was their exercise. But then we did get to see Persepolis and travel the Caspian Sea and so forth.

McFarlane You and the children?

Curlin Well, George went to Persepolis before he went back to the States because there was a medical conference there in Palavi University. It was all very sophisticated. I have a dentist who's Iranian and I was telling him the other day that the first mini skirt I'd bought was in Iran. When we were reunited, we lived in Baltimore where George did his post-doctoral work in infectious

disease and those of us from Dhaka, who were there, including the Bengalis who were there, organized the Bangladesh Information Center as a lobby group. We did fundraising showing Bengali films and so forth. And the point was to get across what had happened to people on the Hill because there was a very big disinformation campaign going on with the administration.

Tape 1, side 2, ends; tape 2 begins.

Curlin

In Bangladesh because we had “inherited” servants that had worked for other people. We had a cook and what they call a bearer, which is sort of like a butler, majordomo of the house. That would have normally been enough but then there were relatives who needed jobs and they came too. And we had a babies’ nurse, Charu Adekhary, who had been married to a man who drank and she had left this man when she had four children and the Baptist missionaries got them back together and they had two more children and then he came around drunk as a skunk and our predecessor threw him out and Charu never lived with him again, but she had six children. So, all the children lived with us, too. She had two that were younger two. And they lived with us and some of the older children were sent to private schools. So, we had a very full household and it was wonderful. The cook would put little Mac on the kitchen table while he rolled out dough and instead of Play-Doh Mac had bread dough to create with. It was just a very loving situation for the kids. There was always somebody to play with and, of course, the weather is ideal. You can play out almost every day of the year. And I don’t think I would have been quite ready for that if I hadn’t grown up in a joint

family. We never knew who was going to be there for dinner. The chaos of all those people didn't bother us. And we went to every wedding. Every time someone married we went to their village for the weddings and then finally when our Ayah's oldest daughters married we gave the weddings in our backyard with great big huge pots to cook in. It was a very happy household. There was a friendship between us. They seemed more like friends than like servants. I taught English to the Ayah's children.

McFarlane So, what years were you in Baltimore as you're waiting this out?

Curlin From '71 to '73. We went back in—George went back earlier to start up the lab and be the acting director and then we went out there in October of '73.

McFarlane Of '73. And at this point it's all—it's familiar.

Curlin Yes. It was unfinished business. The way we left was the worst way you could leave because we left our relationships with people and not knowing what would happen to them. There was just no question that we would go back if we could. And in Baltimore we ran around with a bunch of Bengalis who were stranded in Baltimore. They were at Hopkins in school and so, we got to know them. We made real life long friends at that time one was Mustari Khan. And she was supposed to be teaching me Bengali. In reality we were cooking. I was learning to cook Bengali food. And our kids were the same ages. They played and rode their tricycles. And we talked about what we wanted to do when we went back to Dhaka.

McFarlane What were those conversations like?

Curlin Well, we wanted to do something that would really make a difference. She was a teacher in a nursery school and when I went back, I became the cross

cultural studies teacher at the American school. I helped to reorganize the American school because it had been totally ransacked and closed during the war. And I really had the greatest interest in kids not only Americans but international kids learning about the country. We enlisted a Bengali language teacher, a dance teacher, and did overnights to villages with children.

McFarlane Were you supported generally by the international community?

Curlin Yes. And it was a wonderful little school because people with no credentials taught there. (laughs) Just, Oh, I can teach social studies. So, it was not credentialed but the classes were no more than ten. And since there were no desks they sat around on pillows on the floor and did plays and it was a wonderful educational experience for our kids as well as for others. But in-between this teaching and running the Cross Cultural Center there was a small pox epidemic, in 1974, the year after we got back. And at the same time there was a famine. It especially affected northern Bangladesh. There were people coming into the city in droves and they were so poor that they'd sold their cooking pots. They were on the verge of starvation because even if you got food you couldn't cook it. And this really did stimulate a small pox outbreak. The doctor who ran the WHO program lived around the corner from me and he came to me and he said, "You know all these Bengali women." He said, "We can't get into the household to vaccinate the women and especially the new mothers and the infants."

McFarlane You knew them because of your servants?

Curlin No, because we were all friends. We had been together in Baltimore, a lot of us, and I was in a Bengali women's club. (laughter) And I had Bengali

friends, because of the kids. I wanted them to have Bengali friends, not just American friends. So Stan Foster who ran the WHO smallpox program came to me and said, “We need some teams of volunteers to go into the slums and vaccinate.” I said, “We can’t do that. We’re not medical people.” And he said, “You all show up at the WHO office and I’ll show you exactly what to do.” And the first small pox vaccination I gave was to myself. We had those little bifurcated needles and all you had to do was scrub off an arm, and dip the needle into vaccine and punch fifteen times. And the vaccine was very strong. It was made in Bangladesh and there were real takes and sometimes so bad it looked like people had small pox. Our instruction was to vaccinate anything that moved. There was no eliminating kids with scabies or skin infections. It was a risk-benefit problem because it meant that if those people who didn’t get vaccinated would be exposed, they would get it and expose other people around them. And the way they contained the epidemic eventually was finding a case and vaccinating everybody who had come in contact with that case, which is still a very valid way to treat an epidemic. That’s the way they treated SARS [severe acute respiratory syndrome].

McFarlane So you were actually going into the slums—

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane —sticking people?

Curlin Yes, with my little bifurcated needle.

McFarlane Did people accept you?

Curlin Oh, absolutely. And every place that we went practically the women called us

aside and said, “Apa,” [meaning] big sister, “We don’t want more children. Isn’t there a way to stop having children?”

McFarlane Did that question surprise you?

Curlin It really did because at that time I hadn’t really thought about the population issue except that I had helped people in my own household. One poor guy had a vasectomy at my recommendation. And he developed a hematoma and was therefore unable to do work for a long, long time—he became my dependent. We told the women in the slums, “You go to the clinic.” The clinic is twelve miles away. These women never leave their courtyards. At that time they didn’t even go to the market. They sent a child to the market. Even worse, they didn’t even have a name. They were the mother of Opu. They were third and fourth class citizens in their own homes.

McFarlane So you were just saying go to the clinic?

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane How long did you say that?

Curlin Then we said to each other, “Where is this clinic?” And there was only one clinic that was available to give out family planning. I guess there were some, maybe one Family Planning Association Clinic at that time, but the government clinic was twelve miles away in a suburb which these women would never have had access to. So, we got together, about five us, and decided that if these women could not go, and since that’s what they really wanted, that we would train ourselves and take family planning to them because we all understood enough about family planning to know that the non-clinical methods, like condoms and pills, had a good safety record and

could be used outside of clinical confines. Under these circumstances it was better to take the little risk that we may have been taking than to deny them the ability to control their own fertility, which they desperately wanted to do. And about the same time there was a conference in Bangladesh of population “experts.” And I will never forget that I had been asked as an observer, not to speak, but an expert who will go nameless said, “These women will never understand the concept of family planning so we will have to go to the community leaders, the men, and then they will tell the women what to do.” In the first place there is no community in Bangladesh. Life centers around the household called a bari. It’s a big joint family living together. For example, they would throw their garbage—if they had a wall, they’d throw their garbage right over the wall because their concern didn’t go further than their own courtyards. It wasn’t at all like Indonesia which everybody sort of pointed to as the wonderful example of family planning that every night a gong would sound, every woman would take her pill. Well, Bangladesh is not organized like Indonesia. I felt that these women had such a desire for these services that we didn’t need anybody to tell them what to do. You needed to go to women and give them the information and the supplies.

McFarlane

How did you get supplies?

Curlin

The husband of one of our group worked for the government and he arranged for us to get them from the government warehouse. At that time only 3 percent of women were using modern contraception. They were glad to get rid of them because there was no demand. There were few clinics and

so therefore there was no distribution system for contraceptives.

McFarlane And did this start off small?

Curlin Five of us started Concerned Women and we had a mentor, Dr. Penny Satterthwaite, who had been a missionary in China and then had been involved in the testing of the oral contraceptives in Puerto Rico. Penny was with the UNFPA. And she said, "You can learn all you need to know about family planning." And so every afternoon we went to her house, had a little cup of tea, and she told us about contraindications and what to do and what not to do. And a lot of the women wanted sterilization operations. They had on average six children at a young age. So, we used my car, which was an old Toyota with no muffler and that suited me fine because everybody within five hundred yards could hear me coming and get out of my way. And we used to transport the people who wanted sterilization operations to this clinic but at first they were treated so demeaningly. They wouldn't let the women sit on a bench because they were too dirty. I got so mad that I went into the clinic director and cried. He said, "Don't worry, Peggy, we'll take of this." So, they did improve their service and got sheets for the beds. The next day after surgery we took them home. The problem was that some of them developed infections. Somebody would come from old Dhaka in the middle of the night and I would have to go.

McFarlane And take them to the hospital?

Curlin And take them to the hospital. But we did learn to cut stitches because it was just too many people to transport the new patients and the follow up patients. So, we learned how to follow them up and we used eyebrow

tweezers and sterilized scissors, nail scissors, to cut the stitches, which I got to be very good at. (laughs) So, it was making a whole new system, including a record keeping system because when we got beyond the first five who were all very literate women, we went into another neighborhood and got five more women and trained them with the first neighborhood. But as we picked up these new workers, a lot of them couldn't read. So, we developed a non-literate record keeping system, which they use to this day.

McFarlane How does that work?

Curlin Well, they know numbers. And I will never forget doing NESAs. Number of children now, number of children ever, number of sons and age of the last child, which told you whether or not they were breast-feeding. We didn't give contraceptive pills to breast-feeding women. We enrolled them in the family planning program and visited them every month just as if we would visit a pill client for example.

McFarlane So, you were visiting pill clients monthly?

Curlin After they were secure in the method, every three months. And at the same time we would be counseling other women in their household. So, we'd get their sister-in-law and their sister and many times their mother. And then we were also encouraging the use of condoms. And it was very revealing to me that men would stop us on the street—we didn't have uniforms but we had Concerned Women buttons—and ask the most intimate questions because they trusted women to know the answers about sex. And they particularly trusted us because we were outside the neighborhood. And then we developed a program with factories and with places that employed only men

and we used the depo holder system. We trained the factory foreman to provide both contraceptives and information. And we did this training at tea parties for the men.

McFarlane Tea parties with the men?

Curlin And we would invite them for tea. And the purpose would be to train them in family planning.

McFarlane So, you're inviting the foreman for tea?

Curlin And then he would keep a drawer full of condoms and some pills, but we did a big condom business. One of our clients was the head driver at the Ford Foundation who did us a favor and at night used the Ford Foundation equipment to mimeo our first annual report. I remember this very well. (laughs) So, we had a large outreach for the number of people we were.

McFarlane And was there any incentive for the foreman to cooperate?

Curlin No, no. Just that he was called on and petted and patted and told what good he was doing for the world. It was very appealing. Most workers in Bangladesh are not treated well.

McFarlane So you were extending dignity?

Curlin By giving him credit for having a sense of responsibility.

McFarlane So, this is kind of snowballing at this point?

Curlin It's snowballing. And we had visitors at that time who gave us really good advice on how to do things. And the record keeping system, how to count the records and keep up with continuation, and how to do a life table. And in that first year—in eleven months I was invited to present the Concerned Women case at the second CBD [community-based delivery] conference in

Tunisia. And at that stage of the game the cholera laboratory had also started a family planning project which they asked us to be the consultants on. So we sent our field workers down to their field station in Matlab Bazaar to show the workers what they did and to give them a lesson in the way clients were treated. And that is very important to me is that I insisted that a field worker never sit at a higher level than the client which was a real symbolic thing.

McFarlane This sounds like it might have been innovative then there at the time.

Curlin It was very innovative for the time. We always touched the client, took her hand, put our arms around her shoulder, to be a friend, to show that we were going to be there, we were going to take care of her, that we thought she was important. We treated side effects which nobody did in those days. I don't even know that they do now. They just say you'll get over it.

McFarlane Was this your idea?

Curlin Yes, because they had a side effect which they described as "matha gureh," which means head swinging, dizziness. And there was a fruit called bell fruit which you mixed with water and it has a very soothing effect on your stomach. So, we said you must rest every hour, a few minutes rest, and then often during the day you drink this bell fruit. And the women were just as happy. There was only 5 percent dropout from side effect in over eight thousand women, simply because they knew that we would be there. They knew that we were going to take things seriously and I think that was the most critical breakthrough for that program.

McFarlane That's phenomenal isn't it, in the context of other programs?

Curlin In the context of other programs which are, let's say, built on a clinical model or where the client is really a number rather than a real person. And I found out so much during that period of time because I was on the street everyday. As a matter of fact for the first six months we ran that office out of the back seat of my car. There would be women who were not only funny but they were ribald. You know, they told sort of naughty jokes on each other and their husbands. They were comparing the size of their husbands' you know what. (laughs) I mean these were not helpless victims by any stretch of the imagination.

McFarlane Is that a part of the culture that maybe you just—

Tape 2, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.

Curlin In the household, in the community, on the street and I got to know the women personally, many of them. As a matter of fact, when I went back to Dhaka just a month ago, I was taken to one of our clients in the first neighborhood who is now a grandmother as you can imagine. But I remembered her so well and she so remembered me coming to her home. And it was not upsetting to the community that I was American at all. I was dressed in a kurta-pajama, which is long shirt over cotton pants. I always tied a scarf around my head. And you know, occasionally when we would have a Bengali visitor, the community would say there were two foreigners there. One being me and one being the Bengali because if they had a nice sari on, they were very foreign to their existence. And I never felt in the least threatened or unwelcome. That was the beauty of Bangladesh, to me, was how accepting people were and how welcoming they were and how kind.

McFarlane You're saying were?

Curlin Well, they are still. I think that it has changed in some respects because when I left Bangladesh in '77 the population was seventy million. And it is a hundred and thirty million today. Dhaka, which was where we were working, was a city of 1.5 million, it's eight-plus million now. And it's bound to be different you can't just cram that many people between a river on one side and the train tracks on the other. It's all crammed between these two things. It's a different place although individually Bengalis are very still the same. But it is in a crowd on the street or in a bus or something like that, it's tough.

McFarlane So you came back to—you were there from '73 to '77 and came back to the States in '77?

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane That must have been hard.

Curlin No, I was ready. Because I felt the organization would go on and I felt that my role had been done. That I had done the proposals, I had gotten the funding, and that the one thing I didn't have to worry about is that the women would carry on the service part of it, which they did, it is now one of the bigger family planning programs in the country.

McFarlane It's still called Concerned Women?

Curlin It's now Concerned Women for Family Development. I think it's very much like CEDPA. Instead of CEDPA being the Centre for Population Activities we added a D to our name in the early nineties, so it's Development and Population, CEDPA. Concerned Women is now Concerned Women for Family Development, not Family Planning, as it started out.

McFarlane That's what I wanted to back up a little on, Concerned Women. When did you come up with that name?

Curlin Early. We worked as volunteers in the small pox program and then I had this literally a vision of how a system could be initiated that would take family planning to those women since there's no way they could come to clinics. And it seemed to me that to distinguish the family planning worker—to give her a legitimate role on the street, believe me at that time it was the city of men. You never saw women on the street. Now it's quite different. But I would get buttons and Doug Huber, who was probably have been in your study too, had those buttons made and send them to me from the States. And they just had all the panish in the world.

McFarlane And what did the buttons say?

Curlin It just was a picture of a woman in silhouette reaching out to a woman and a child. And then we had the name of the organization. Udbigna mohila jinnya paribar pari kalpana.

McFarlane So, you come back in '77?

Curlin Yes, and was introduced by Phyllis Piotrow, who had been out to see the program Bangladesh and she wanted me to meet Kaval Guhati, who was the vice president then of CEDPA [CEFPA] because she thought that we would really hit it off. At the same time Mustari Khan, who had taken my place as the director of Concerned Women, came to the training program that was being done here. And she stayed at my house and she was always saying to Kaval, "You must meet my friend Piggy [Peggy]." And Phyllis actually got us together for a lunch. And we did hit off and we—coming at it from very

different angles, very different because Kaval was working towards her D.Phil. at Oxford on health delivery systems and was including CBD, which was new then, and I had the field experience, which is a little bit of a flip flop from what you expect with an Indian and an American. But at the same time we shared the same strategy. And she was very interested in doing something just for women because CEFPA, as it was known then, had been training population and administrators—population and health administrators and only 20 percent were women. It was very clear to both of us that women were doing all the work in this sector. You know, the service delivery and the providers were all women. And an isolated man was making the decisions about how long the clinic should be open, what should be offered. So, we decided that we would get together a group of experts to advise us on how to do a women-centered population program. It was the most innovative of conferences because we had three different groups over three days. We had a Women and Development groups, a Family Planning Service Delivery group and the third day we had a management group. We didn't get very enthusiastic response from the first two and we got actually negative response from the management group.

McFarlane

So, none of the three groups were very—

Curlin

It was very lukewarm from the population people because they really didn't think that it was proper for a woman (laughter) to be managing a big family planning program. And it was only the WID group who thought that this was an idea whose time had come in the fact that this would open up new vistas for women. However they weren't very enthusiastic about family

planning. We would go to the population office and ask for support, and they would tell us that we were doing WID and then we would go to the WID office and they'd say, Oh, no, what you're doing is family planning. And we often called ourselves the two stools project because we fell between the two stools that were very defined. If you were going to do WID, you were going to do economic, income generation. Women's development had nothing to do with women's health.

McFarlane Or fertility?

Curlin Or fertility.

McFarlane Did you know at the time you were with Concerned Women or developing it that you were inventing CBD?

Curlin Did I know that? I don't think that I really did because I didn't have enough experience. I can't tell you how inexperienced I was and as a matter of fact the closest I ever came to being really mad at my husband was when I presented him this idea, which I had presented to my women's consciousness-raising group and gotten a lot of support for the night before, I came home so excited, told him about it, and he said, "You're not qualified to do that." I said, "When we got married, you weren't qualified for anything." And I threw a plate across the room. (laughter) It was one of those moments when you really literally see red because I thought, you know, how many years did I work for him and with him so that he could get his qualifications.

McFarlane What was your idea that you weren't qualified for?

Curlin That we would do this CBD, that we would, you know, go to the household,

offer this service. And then he did feel bad about it and he started bringing me family planning articles. And what I got out of those articles was that nobody contracepts like a Chinese Ph.D. (laughter) in Singapore. So I really didn't learn a whole lot from the literature because there was practically nothing in the literature about CBD.

McFarlane So when you came here it was CEFPA?

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane And did you start working here right away after you met the director?

Curlin I wrote the proposal that funded my salary. (laughter) And that was for this conference and for a trip to see what the interest of women in Africa and Asia particularly were to this kind of training. And we did this three day conference with about ninety people involved and then Kaval went to Asia and I went to Africa with this little Xerox copy of the schedule of the matrix of the program which the management people had helped to develop and that's about all we had. I had never been to Africa before in my life.

McFarlane Where were you?

Curlin Well, I went to Egypt. I went to the Sudan. I went to Kenya. And where else did I go? I can't remember. All these trips are getting jumbled in my mind. (laughter) But those were countries that stood out in my mind because of people I met there.

McFarlane Well, how did you pull this off? I mean you've never been to Africa.

Curlin Never, never.

McFarlane And you're trying to meet people who will support your idea?

Curlin And those who will also give feedback about the idea. I wasn't trying to just

meet AID people. I was trying to meet people who worked in social services, family planning and education. And in most of the countries that I went to, somebody was there who I knew. And I just called and said, "I'm coming and this is what I would like to do." And they were wonderful. I stayed with people and they made appointments for me to see other people. And then, of course, CEFPA had some alumni in those countries, too.

McFarlane Mostly men, correct?

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane But they helped you?

Curlin Yes, indeed they did.

McFarlane Even the men?

Curlin Yes. And I got so excited in Kenya because the head of the city family planning program then gave me his nurse Cornelia Muga to go around with. And Cornelia took me to Mathari Valley, the slums. And I said, "Well, how do you find people?" And she said, "Because the latrines are numbered. People know where they go to the bathroom." And that was such a breakthrough to me because you can't find anybody in Bangladesh. You know whether it's near the mosque or whatever, but there is no numbering system and there wasn't in the Mathari Valley either except people knew this number. And I've always been very interested in slum work because you can do things on such a vast scale in the slum because you're not walking between places. And in rural areas half your day is spent walking to get some place. And the slums are just, as they say, ripe for the pickings because you've got all these people. There is an epidemiology factor known as the

herd effect. Once you get this little core of satisfied users everybody will use family planning.

McFarlane So you go to Africa to find people to support your idea or to see if they will?

Curlin Yes, or to see if they need this kind of training or whether it would be useful to them. And everywhere we went, both Kaval and I, people have said, Oh, I've been looking for this. May I keep this? And by the time we got home the first program, we had 350 applications.

McFarlane For a training program? And how long was the training program?

Curlin Five weeks.

McFarlane Was the training program for women?

Curlin Yes, it was our Women in Management program. And at the time we started the emphasis was on management, how to keep records, how to supervise people, modules on leadership style. Pretty quickly after the '85 Nairobi Conference it changed to be more directed towards leadership because it wasn't an issue of just being a better manager, you're not going to get promoted. You're going to have to tear down the glass ceiling with your fingernails. And it became, in a way, a more interesting program. Today, we have added advocacy and strategic communications to the program. This was added before the Cairo conference in '93 and when we did advocacy training of our delegation to Cairo. So it's really management leadership and advocacy. And it's not only advocacy, but social mobilization to get other people to support your change effort.

McFarlane How did this evolve in Nairobi?

Curlin There was so much talk before the Nairobi Conference that women's

programs were women's economic development. We thought that once we trained these managers that they would find resources. A part of the training was to write proposals. They could go get funding. That was absolutely untrue because they had no track records for the most part. And the money went to old established institutions which were male dominated. So, we felt there was a big gap between the rhetoric and the actuality of women and women's programs. And the evolving of a strategy based leadership program was how to break out of this mold that held women managers back in at least the developing countries. And it was quite new here too in the mid eighties. It was an exciting time to be doing this work in Kenya, for example, after that conference there was proliferation of women's groups. As a matter of fact at one period in time there were fifty thousand women's groups who were registered with their district governments. They were not all there at the Nairobi Conference, but they did get inspired to do something and to form groups and to work on improving their communities.

McFarlane What do you see as the difference between management and leadership?

Curlin Well, I think you can be a very good manager and not have vision and, not be conscious of your leadership potential.

McFarlane Can you go a little further with leadership?

Curlin (speaking at the same time) There were no role models. I mean who are you going to look at as a good leader? There's so few of them and at that time there were so few of them here. In developing countries you could look at the population field, for example, and there'd be no women in decision making positions. For example, when I joined Interaction, which is a U.S.

consortium of development agencies, I joined for one reason, I believed that reproductive health was a development issue. CEDPA was the only reproductive health organization that joined at that time. And I was the only woman CEO.

McFarlane Out of how many?

Curlin A hundred and sixty something.

McFarlane And what year was that?

Curlin It must have been in the mid eighties. At that time we just sort of glossed over the situations that existed but, they were really holding women back. Women have to work out strategies and often learn from what they hear from each other. They are mentoring each other while they are here for five weeks. And they learned, I would dare say, they learned a lot from us too in terms of just watching us, how we operated, because we always operated as a team in that training program. And it was the first time any of them had seen a team operate in a workplace.

McFarlane A team of women or a team at all?

Curlin A team at all. It was a challenge rising to the top. You wouldn't want to share that with anybody else. And when you got to the top then there would be somebody who was jealous and would cut your head off. (laughs) I've seen that happen a thousand times.

McFarlane So, that was people's perception or that was something you wanted to change?

Curlin That was something I wanted to change is that you didn't have to follow a male pattern of leadership, that you could create a more nurturing

environment for leadership and you could get better work out of people. It wasn't a question of sacrificing efficiency for niceness. This was a particular problem with women leaders and I think it's still a problem. This is a book that I'd be interested in doing is that women expect more from a woman leader. Women employees expect more from a female leader than they do from a man.

McFarlane That's your observation. Let me back up just a bit and you came here in '78 or to this organization, at what point did you become the president?

Curlin It was in 1989 when Kaval retired. Her husband had been at the World Bank and he retired and they wanted to spend six months a year in India and six months here.

McFarlane But in—during that time you were training people in managing the program?

Curlin Because one of the things we've found out following the track Nairobi is that there was no money available for this great commitment to WID. The commitment to women programs was only hypothetical. It wasn't real. And so we decided that if women were ever going to build a track record, get that experience, that we needed to make funding available in small amounts not large amounts. And we went to Bob Wallace at what is now PAI and he gave us without question \$250,000 for our seed money projects. And from 1981 we had started giving small grants to local women who were helped by our Washington trained alumni to develop a program, a project, put together a group of women to do something. And when I went back ten years later and looked at these programs. Eighty-five percent of them were still operational, had grown, and were still delivering the same service that they had originally

intended to provide. These were grants from three to five thousand dollars. And that was a great learning experience for me. I feel that that was one of the other signal events in CEDPA. I saw most of the projects and they really taught me more about leadership than anything. Leaders are risk takers and that the qualities of leadership are not just at the top levels they are at every level and you need to invest in those levels.

McFarlane So, between—let's see. As of—you got funded to do a grant, become a pilot and go to Africa in '78, and then did you get continuing funding?

Curlin No. We got training money. We got some training money from—do you know the 104D money?

McFarlane No.

Curlin It was money generated by the Percy Amendment.

Tape 2 ends; tape 3, side 1, begins.

Curlin USAID's office of Policy and Program Coordination gave us a grant to combine women's and family planning programs in West Africa. And we did training in six west African countries, two week training program. And that really did build that network in West Africa in francophone Africa that we wouldn't have had otherwise. And then in '83 I went as an advisor to AID to Nigeria. And we went literally all over the country.

McFarlane How long were you there?

Curlin About six weeks. And then I've been back at least once a year ever since then. I have spent more time in Nigeria than almost any place. What Nigerian women, a small group of women can do at the local level is critical to the development efforts. I mean, you can talk about development at the

macro level, but if it's going to happen, it has to happen at the local level. And these women are so worth the investment because they can make it happen. (pause in recording)

McFarlane —president of CEDPA. This is May 15, 2003. (pause in recording) How did you get into family planning?

Curlin I'm very fond of saying I got into family planning because I was invited by those women that I went to see in the small pox program. But I wanted to tell you about the one woman who had the most influence on my life. In vaccinating for small pox in the slums, we were told to hold the vile in our hands and keep our thumb over the top. Well, I had not managed to get the metal top quite off and I cut my thumb. And it just got huge. It was vaccinated and had nowhere to go. And I ended up having to have the darn thing lanced because it was so painful and so swollen. So, again, the WHO person said, "Well, since you can't go out to the slums, could you possibly just oversee fixing meals at the Infectious Disease Hospital? Because the small pox patients are not being fed and they're running away." And, of course, when they ran away they were infecting anybody that came into contact with them. And I said, "Well, sure, I guess I can do that." And when I went to the hospital, it was as if it were out of the plague years. One floor was diphtheria. One floor was rabies. One floor was cholera. One floor was small pox and on that ward that was made for thirty there were 170 people. And the top floor, the fifth floor, was leprosy. And here were all these people jammed in together and it had never dawned on anybody to vaccinate the other people in the hospital. So, my job was to go every morning and

give the money to this little man who was the steward. He was supposed to go and purchase the food and what had really been happening is he'd been running away with the money and the patients weren't being fed. They didn't even have anything to feed them with. There wasn't a plate. There wasn't a glass. There wasn't anything. So, I went to the area where they made pottery, made flower pots, and got plates that you would have under a flower pot. And I bought a hundred of those plates and took them over there so they could have something to eat out of and every meal they brought up in big buckets. It was terribly unappetizing. But nonetheless the patients were fed and stopped running away, I mean, those who didn't die that is. And on that ward out in a hall on a little bed was a woman and I said, "Where did this woman come from?" Because she sort of just appeared there. And it turned out that she had been up on the leprosy ward, she had been raped by a worker at the hospital, she was pregnant, and she got small pox. And the fatality of pregnant women was 90 percent. And I sat there while that woman died. And I thought, Something has to be done. Everybody in the system had let down this woman—the medical people, the hospital people, the whole system had conspired to kill her. And that was really the turning point in which I thought that that injustice had to be fixed and that by putting together this little project I could at least do what I could do and what our friends could do to keep fertility from killing women in the first place and to be there to see that they got justice even if we only were the witnesses that we could do something by telling their story.

McFarlane

So, you got the need to control fertility from that?

Curlin Yes. Because she wasn't killed by small pox, she wasn't killed by the leprosy, she wasn't killed by anything other than her pregnancy.

McFarlane Do you think even broader than that in terms of violence against women?

Curlin I have to admit that injustice against women was a more motivating force because people didn't in that stage of the game talk much about violence against women. And I had known that there was violence against women because we had a next door neighbor when lived in the States whose husband beat her and we'd call the police. But I have always been very sensitive to injustice and violence is to me a part of injustice. It's the powerful taking it out on the powerless.

McFarlane That's a powerful image to keep with you.

Curlin Well, I have really had that all my life and just this woman who had no attendants. Generally people who came to the hospital had to bring their whole family to take care of them because there certainly was no nursing care. And she had nobody.

McFarlane And she just died.

Curlin And she just died.

McFarlane Well, we got as far as you coming back to the States.

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane And we talked about management and leadership which you've developed and I think we'll develop even further today. The night—well, you finished out the 1970s at this organization, were you aware of the political atmosphere?

Curlin Well, I was and I wasn't. It wasn't a matter of who was in the White House

as much as it was trying to break down the doors of the funders because we were, as I said to you, we were the two stools project. People absolutely refused to accept the fact that you could do anything with family planning to enhance it that you just had to—you've interviewed Ravenholt—drop those pills out of airplanes. (laughs)

McFarlane I didn't know that was the view. (laughter)

Curlin Well, that was the view.

McFarlane And some how women would take them.

Curlin Yes. Ravenholt was in charge at AID'S Office of Population and he said to somebody after we, Kaval and I, had been to see him, he said, "What are those women think they're doing, training amazons?" (laughter) I've never forgotten that. And I thought that was the greatest compliment. Yes, that says it all. But somebody at AID also called us and said, "You girls don't understand anything about budgeting." Here we were both in our forties by that time. But it was a very male-dominated atmosphere.

McFarlane Did they provide most of the support for this organization?

Curlin Well, except for little bits of money from private foundations, they did. And we got our first, I think it was a three million dollar grant, from the Office of Population in 1985. And that was really due to the director who took over after Ravenholt, Steve Sinding. And we wouldn't have gotten it except for him.

McFarlane That was '95?

Curlin Eighty-five. Because we were just out of the mainstream.

McFarlane But Sinding could see what you were doing?

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane He could understand that. Now, at this point were you calling it an empowerment approach?

Curlin The first title of our program was Family Planning Through Third World Women Managers. We weren't brave enough to say empowerment because that would have killed it right there. But, we had these women who had then been in our management training program. And they were ready to go. They saw the need. They were very eager to do something. I think CEDPA is unique in that almost none of them were health workers.

McFarlane Oh, so, this really was an integrated development project?

Curlin Yes, it was. They had women's groups and they had wonderful projects doing other things.

McFarlane Was this a deliberate strategy on your part to recruit people outside of the health sector?

Curlin Yes, yes.

McFarlane Did you turn down health sector people?

Curlin No. But there were many projects which were only doing health sector and clinics. And I was so sure these women could do it because I had done a non-clinical outreach program. If we could do it in Bangladesh anybody could do it. And that it was so satisfying to be able to really tangibly meet a need. The training of our project managers was really based on what we in Bangladesh had to teach ourselves.

McFarlane Which were—included budgeting, right?

Curlin Budgeting, yes—

McFarlane —for the girls.

Curlin —budgeting for the girls. But it also included how to write a proposal, how to supervise staff, just the basics of management at that time.

McFarlane Did you at the time—were you reading about the basics of management?

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane Okay. How—were you modifying it because you had a different paradigm in mind?

Curlin Absolutely.

McFarlane Tell me about modifying the conventional management wisdom?

Curlin Well, I think at that time that supervision, for example, was sort of command and control oriented. It's based on what you didn't do right. And I think that we developed a team approach where somebody was responsible, but everybody participated and felt that they were a part of that team and the goals were mutual goals. They weren't handed out to them and said, Okay, you go and do this.

McFarlane How do you know when you get there?

Curlin Well, you do know when you see field workers who can tell you exactly what's going on and how many people are enrolled. Field workers were, and I think very often are now, treated as not knowing anything, incapable of learning anything, and have to be watched like hawks. And that was a feeling that we had to overcome because there was a lot of male role modeling and that's how males managed—by punishing to people. And we were able to convince women that that wasn't the most effective way to manage and it was also more rewarding for them if they could share what the field workers

knew. One of the biggest gaps—and Everett Rogers pointed this out—was that the gender communication gap that females who were then all the family planning workers could not talk to their bosses who were all male. So, they never got into the feedback loop. And I thought that was extremely important, and we reinforced the idea that if you don't have a clue what's going on at the household level, you don't have a program. You can't build on a theory. You have to have the reality that comes with going and seeing it and one of the nice things about the women to women approach was that everybody could go to the household. The supervisor went to the household not just the fieldworker.

McFarlane And that wasn't to check up on the fieldworker?

Curlin No. That was to see how the client was doing, how she liked what she was getting, and was she getting enough attention from the project. So, it was a very hands-on supervision approach which was not then the male model at all.

McFarlane Well, did—over the years, especially while you were training, did you have a hard time convincing the students here at CEDPA of that model, that approach?

Curlin Actually participative training is addicting. (laughs) It takes them about one day to get used to participating and then they will never go back to just sitting and listening to a lecture.

McFarlane Is it participative?

Curlin Participative. It's where the leader is a facilitator and the participants are sharing their knowledge with each other rather than this all being handed out

to them. There are no guidelines. There are no “do this don’t do that.” There are no rules to the game but there’s a lot of small group work where participants are dealing with an issue. And one of the most interesting exercises that we did, was given to us by a consultant named Jackie Rumley. And she did an exercise with participants on the first or second day called the From-To Exercise. She asked them to picture their mothers and grandmothers and where they, themselves, were today. And this was just a fascinating thing for them and then she would have them mark the ones, the transitions that were most important, and then in small groups understand why those transitions happened. And it was—you know, it really did bring their consciousness up to a level where they really thought that they had the answers.

McFarlane Can you give me an example here?

Curlin Well, if my grandmother, let’s say, had eighteen children and I have two children, something happened in that period between them. One is access to family planning, the other is my ability to decide how many children I want to have, and the third thing is being able to talk to my husband, which my grandmother wasn’t ever able to do. And the fourth thing is probably what society thinks. It’s now acceptable to only have two children. In grandmother’s day that wouldn’t have been acceptable and she might have been divorced.

McFarlane Uh-huh, okay, thank you. So were you training most of the late seventies into the eighties?

Curlin Yes, both here and overseas. I did in country training programs too.

McFarlane Did it mushroom after the U.S. AID money?

Curlin Well, it did. We had always the goal of doing our training in country. And it was a funny reason for that goal because it wasn't just so we could train more people, but it was to give our Washington trained alumni further education in how to train and facilitate programs. So, we had a week's training of trainers where they adapted the program. Exercises that we'd done in Washington were changed quite a lot. I remember very well the program that I did in Kenya we did an exercise on leadership. What kind of leader are you, how would you characterize yourself. And they came up with the idea of using animal pictures and asking women to go and stand under the animal that they were most like. Some were lions and some of them were rabbits. (They were too nervous to lead.) The more sophisticated concepts were adapted in a very simple way so that women at the grassroots level, the community level, could get the same kind of information that women here in Washington did.

McFarlane So, Washington staff went out and worked with them in country?

Curlin It would be one Washington staff and five or six alumni.

McFarlane So, you work as a trainer and manager through the 1980s until you became president?

Curlin Yes, also fundraiser and jack of all trades. But my predecessor, Kaval, and I had a wonderful partnership and she was doing the same thing I was doing. There was really no difference in our jobs and as a matter of fact some funders related to her and thought she was very exotic in her sari and some funders particularly the AID people related better to me. So, we used to be

very out front about that. Now, who should go? So we had a very good symbiotic relationship. And she tended to do most of the training programs in Asia and I tended to do them in Africa. And we had, later on in the eighties, we had Spanish-speaking program officers on our staff who did programs in Latin America.

McFarlane Yeah, and the way you've talked about—you've talked earlier about a new paradigm for leadership and people not necessarily being competitive with each other and that's what this relationship between you and Kaval sounds like. You weren't waiting until she retired so you could—

Curlin No not at all. We really did work well as a team and other people in the organization, which was then growing, were very team oriented too. And so one of the things I've heard over and over again in all the years I've been here is that we learned how to work in a team from seeing CEDPA work in a team.

McFarlane Do you recruit people based on what you perceive as their ability?

Curlin No.

McFarlane To do that?

Curlin Not really. It's the corporate culture. I'd say that. If they're not doing that, then it's going to be tough on them. But at the same time we really, like every organization in our field, we recruit based on what's necessary for a project, I mean, what skills are necessary, what experience and background is necessary.

McFarlane The eighties were an interesting time for population very—politically. Did that affect you? The first Mexico City Policy, Reagan administration?

Curlin Well, it did. It was I guess as close to a moral dilemma as we ever came because it was whether to sign the Mexico City, language or not.

McFarlane In '85?

Curlin In '85?

McFarlane What was the dilemma?

Curlin There was a lot of agencies who discouraged us from signing even though most ended up signing. They discouraged us from signing and by that time we did have AID money and we would have sacrificed that money. Because we were doing mostly non-clinical work the issue of abortions didn't arise except for the fact that I knew that if a woman came in hemorrhaging from self-inflicted abortion they were going to wrap her up and take her to the hospital. I had the feeling that it was dealt with on a local level. And that is something that actually bothered me a great deal because I felt that if one of our projects was even accused of having spoken about abortion or transported somebody for an abortion that there was in the language no arbitration clause. Being accused was being guilty. And then we would be forced to break off funding of that organization.

Tape 3, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.

Curlin You were guilty until proven innocent.

McFarlane Did that actually happen in agencies in the eighties or was it a fear?

Curlin It was a fear and I don't know that everybody shared it or not. But again it's this injustice thing. You know, I felt that it was very unjust to accept somebody's word without having to prove that they were actually providing the service.

McFarlane And you felt secure that at the ground people would take a bleeding woman or a woman with an infection to the hospital. At the ground were you worried about if a woman said that I'm going to go get an abortion?

Curlin I didn't ask.

McFarlane Okay.

Curlin It was a don't ask don't tell situation because I know that when I was in Bangladesh, and this was even before the Helms Amendment came in, that I was asked, oh, ten or twelve times to take somebody for an abortion. And I did because I was very concerned that they'd be safe and that they get the counseling of the physician that I couldn't counsel them about it but that they really needed to see a doctor.

McFarlane So, the eighties were kind of a mixed bag for this organization politically. U.S. AID provides funding. You've got to deal with Mexico City.

Curlin The decision was made in consultation with the board, of course, that family planning prevented abortion and if we stopped doing family planning we were only contributing to the problem of abortion.

McFarlane A tough, tough issue.

Curlin It really is a tough issue because in one way it burns me up that *Roe v. Wade* made first and second trimester abortion legal in this country but because you were a poor third world woman you were served by some AID money, you couldn't.

McFarlane How do you see that in political terms?

Curlin Well, I think it's hypocrisy to tell you the truth. I think it is a punishment on women. Some men feel that if a woman got herself in trouble that she

should have to pay for it. Well, society pays for it, don't they?

McFarlane Um, yeah. Did the advent of Clinton change things?

Curlin I must say that it's the first time since I had been in this business that I hadn't been afraid of my government, literally. I would go home at night and wake at two in the morning just sure that I had said the wrong thing, done the wrong thing, just terrified. And when Clinton came in and reversed the Mexico City language on the second day of his presidency and began to invite us around—I mean people at the State Department invited us. We, family planning people, were not pariahs.

McFarlane And that's how you felt during—

Curlin Yes, very much so.

McFarlane Even during the Carter years?

Curlin Yes—well, I mean I think that the Carter years were so confusing that they didn't reach out to the extent that Clinton did right from the beginning.

McFarlane So, from '92 forward it's looking up.

Curlin Yes. And it is also the beginning of CEDPA as being thought of as a major player. When I became president in '89, I had one goal and one goal only and that was to be a ten million dollar organization. At that time we were at three million. And I thought that you weren't taken seriously unless you were a ten million dollar organization.

McFarlane How did you pick ten million?

Curlin Just sort of thinking about the organizations that I knew and how big their budgets were and what's the minimum we could have and still be taken seriously and not as some group of ladies knitting in the corner some place.

- McFarlane** Taken seriously by whom?
- Curlin** By people in our field by other family planning population groups and WID groups.
- McFarlane** And you joined Interaction when?
- Curlin** Yes.
- McFarlane** So, did you succeed?
- Curlin** Three times over, three and half times over. But after I reached ten million I was satisfied and I had other goals but that were incredibly important to me.
- McFarlane** How long did that take you?
- Curlin** Well, we could look in these annual reports but I think it probably took me four years to do that because in the second year—the first year I was president we—I became president in July of '89 and in '90 our budget fell by a hundred thousand. It's something I've been very conscious of for my successor. You need a cushion because donors are going to wait to see who you are, how you are, what your goals are before they are going to fund you. And then from '91 it picked up and it's thirty-three million this year.
- McFarlane** Let me just back up a little bit. In the eighties, did you know to change from the Reagan—would you let me know— (pause in recording) So did you see a change from the Reagan to the Bush administration?
- Curlin** Not much. And you know we were expecting a change because Bush had written the preface to Phyllis Piotrow's book, as I'm sure you know, on population. We also knew that Barbra Bush had expressed that she was pro-choice. Then, in my view anyway, he sold out to the right.
- McFarlane** Do you feel that, the right wing, directly in this organization?

- Curlin** We feel that we have to be very careful. Let me put it that way.
- McFarlane** Because of your AID money?
- Curlin** Well, just because we're a family planning group. I mean, you know, we don't let just anybody walk in here. We screen phone calls, that sort of thing, because we have been harassed in the past.
- McFarlane** You have been?
- Curlin** Yes.
- McFarlane** Can you—
- Curlin** Well, just by phone calls, you know. Is this an abortion mill? That sort of thing.
- McFarlane** So, Clinton is, at least at the beginning, a fresh new start. Now how long does it take you to get about—how to get to the ten million?
- Curlin** I think it was about four years, but I can check that.
- McFarlane** You answered that, I'm sorry. And so, the first part of the Clinton administration, you're growing and being supported and being respected.
- Curlin** Yes.
- McFarlane** How did the—from the—and you went to Cairo, is that correct?
- Curlin** I was on the U.S. Delegation.
- McFarlane** How did you get there? I mean how were you selected?
- Curlin** I don't really know but I think there were a lot of people who admired CEDPA's more holistic approach. I guess maybe there was some back lash to Ravenholt and the group at AID who were demographically driven. Many liked the CEDPA approach and knew that we had focused on building a network of these wonderful women. The appointment was made by Tim

Wirth. And every time, to this day, that I see Tim he says, “Your women remind me of James Agee’s *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men*.” Do you know that book? It’s a book of photography of people from Appalachia actually. But he said, “There’s so much character in their faces.” And he just fell for the CEDPA alumni network. And we committed ourselves to bring sixty or more people to all of the Cairo activities. Not just to Cairo, but to the buildup to Cairo, to the technical meetings and the prepcoms [preparatory committees].

McFarlane Sixty?

Curlin And I was told at that time by Nafis Sadik that we had the second largest delegation. The Right to Life was first. But it was a powerful experience for us all. I was also with the delegation negotiating. And then our network was lobbying their own delegates. At the last prepcom we had about forty, and thirteen of them came back on their delegations because they’d proven themselves so useful.

McFarlane Explain the prepcom process.

Curlin Well, they are sort of like working groups in any U.N. Conference the report or the final recommendations are written by the time you get there. And that’s how they are written. They are written during the prepcoms and they are more informal but the delegations do meet in sort of formal setting of the UN agencies. And CEDPA is a registered NGO by ECOSOC. The economic and security part of the UN has given us status. And we have the right to speak, but for no more than five minutes.

McFarlane But you’re at the table?

Curlin Well, we're actually up in a balcony. But we do have access. And not too many NGOs here have been registered with ECOSOC.

McFarlane Are there other women in development groups here?

Curlin No.

McFarlane So CEDPA is unique in that respect.

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane What was Cairo like or were the decisions made by the time you got there?

Curlin Well, in a way they were. It reservations that were taken on the language. I mean this document was parsed—every sentence was parsed. And the CEDPA alumni network was able in the prepcoms to get in a chapter on the Girl Child, which was really our greatest contribution I think.

McFarlane Explain that, please.

Curlin We had done a conference in '87 with some very good and famous people in Bellagio, in Italy. Rockefeller had given us permission to use the Bellagio villa, and Anne Richards who then became governor of Texas, Nafis Sadik from UNFPA, Gigi Geyer, who's an AP syndicated columnist were there as well as academics from New Zealand and from Canada. And we had a group of service providers. I mean these were not high level women but they really were at the hands on level and they all came together to decide where the field needed to go and they decided that unless we reached girls we were not going to be successful in empowering women. That a thirty-five year old woman with five children has closed so many doors for herself that's it very difficult for her to do anything but what she's doing. So, we then had regional conferences in three regions. When I was trying to pull together the

conference papers, the background papers, there wasn't anything on girls from five to fifteen. Below five there was infant mortality and health statistics and immunization statistics—not aggregated by sex, I must say. You know, you couldn't tell whether all these kids were boys, and I suspected that most of them were boys. In my experience in Bangladesh they never took a girl to the doctor but they always took the sons. At any rate the period after fifteen is lumped in with women of reproductive age even though they are not women. Even physically they're really not ready to conceive and bare children but there is just very, very little data on girls. And so at any rate through these regional conferences it was decided that some things should be done for girls between five and fifteen and that in Asia it was recommended to SARC that 1990 be the year of the girl child. And it became the year of the girl child. And, you know, CEDPA couldn't really pick up on that in a big way but UNICEF did and made it the decade of the girl child, the most ignored member of the family. CEDPA did was to develop training manuals for those girls and we decided that it would be difficult to take five and six year olds but that we would focus on girls from ten to nineteen as our target group. And we developed a program first in India called Options for a Better Life. And then that program which was so successful and is still successful. It's still going on big time today. Other countries that we were working in wanted to have their own program.

McFarlane So, were you training young girls?

Curlin It includes a life skills training on reproduction, on general health, hygiene, and job readiness. It focused on what a girl's role in society. The emphasis of

this program is to make girls feel that they had a very important role to play and there are many options open to them and that education is one that they should try to exercise. It was not a substitute for formal education but a way to get through to parents of those girls that they really should be in school that they would benefit and that the parents would also benefit.

McFarlane

So, did you train parents or just—

Curlin

Both. It was a community-based approach. And I remember very well that this old man, an old village elder, said, “Better life, you have said it well.” And he loved that program because he could see these girls just bloom. And that’s when I came to know that empowerment is different in different contexts. One of the most empowering things that they did was to get on a bus together and go to another village. None of them had ever been out of their own village. And they put on a cultural show in the next village and, of course, none of them would have had the guts to get up in front of audience and do anything. Even going to the post office was so foreign for them. They were just wonderful girls. The Better Life program [Options for a Better Life] in India was also doing job readiness. And we were trying to think of unusual nontraditional work that the girls could be trained to do and one of the most successful ones was to train them in videography. And when they first introduced this subject I said, “Oh, my goodness, what will they do with this?” Then they had a skill but they will never have a video camera. But they made little short films and they took them to the village close by and showed them to other girls their age. And I will never forget, one of them was called *My Life as an Iron*, and it was how heavy the work

load was and how violent the family was to that girl. It was staged, but you know that this came from real life. At any rate, they learned to cut video and take video and produce these things and they started being hired by villagers to video weddings. (laughs) So, they made lots of money and then, of course, if we had a conference or something we'd hire them to video the conferences instead of a commercial company. It wasn't wasted. Learning that technique was really able to be put to use. And I would have sworn it wasn't. And the other thing I've been very wrong about is chickens. In Kenya the group decided to raise chickens and I went to see this group and I said, "Oh, why did you let them raise chickens? The chickens are just all going to die of disease." I knew about chickens. And so, they said, "No, we get the vet to come and he immunizes the chickens." And I said, "Well, how many eggs can this village eat?" They had 1600 chickens and the village didn't have more than a hundred and twenty people and they said, Oh, one of the women has a son who works as a waiter in Mombasa and they've made an arrangement: the restaurant will come and get the eggs and take them to Mombasa. And they were making money hand over fist because not only did they have the chickens but they had a market for the eggs. I've been wrong so many times because experience that you've had or heard of about things not working is not true in every context. Anything can work. These women can figure out a way to make it work.

McFarlane And you were able to get the idea of the Girl Child in to Cairo?

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane How did you do that or how did that play out?

Curlin Well, I lobbied the U.S. delegation and these women lobbied their own delegations and when it came up it was put in.

McFarlane Did that surprise you?

Curlin No, it really didn't because it was pretty non-controversial. Where we really had trouble was on adolescent sexual education, and the term reproductive and sexual health.

McFarlane Tell me about those and the trouble.

Curlin Well, they were very controversial with the—some of the Islamic states, not all of them, and with Catholic states like Guatemala. Guatemala was against almost everything. And we had two Guatemalan women with us. They were magnificent. They just went and twisted arms. They approved the document but don't approve this language in this paragraph or this sentence.

McFarlane It sounds tedious.

Curlin Most tedious. And it would go on until midnight, starting at eight thirty in the morning and going through until midnight and there would be these caucuses of various states in rooms and you waited outside to grab some of the delegates to lobby them. It was very interesting. The UN operated by consensus on Cairo. They never voted on anything.

McFarlane So, you could be there for a while.

Curlin Oh, we were there for a long, long, long time. But by the time Cairo came everything was almost hashed out. There were no big issues because you knew who was going to reserve on what and that there's nothing you can do to change their minds.

McFarlane Now the nineties—did—should—is there more that you would like to say

about Cairo?

Curlin No, just other than it was a peak experience for all of us who took part on the US delegation. It really was for the CEDPA women who took part also.

McFarlane Why?

Curlin We did training in advocacy before each sessions and it was hearing something, practicing something and then going out in real life with that same thing. And they did things they never thought they could do.

McFarlane Such as?

Curlin Well, talk to high ministry people in their governments.

McFarlane Was CEDPA part of the group that I think some of the people that changed the focus from—

Curlin Oh, yes.

McFarlane From demographics to—

Curlin Women centered.

McFarlane Was that a planned plot?

Curlin No, it wasn't. It was a bigger group. It wasn't just CEDPA. By the time we got to the prepcoms we had met together with some of the groups that were still very pro-demography. So we'd already had this dialogue started and where things broke down a little bit is that the feminists wouldn't accept any of the language that indicated there was a population growth problem. Now I think there is.

Tape 3 ends; tape 4, side 1, begins.

McFarlane —in terms of getting rid of the demographic target?

Curlin No, I mean I could see their point and agreed with their point but I also

agreed with people who felt that had the population growth was going to sink whatever development had taken place.

McFarlane Did you say that at the table?

Curlin Oh, I've said that. And, you know, it doesn't make me any more popular with the demographic people than it does with the feminists. But I think the Bangladesh experience was one that will forever be the guiding principle. It really did hold back development and still does today.

McFarlane Speaking of that I noticed in reviewing the tapes that I hadn't gotten the idea of the scale of Concerned Women, how many people you were serving or what it grew to.

Curlin They probably serve a couple of million women a year.

McFarlane Now?

Curlin Now. And in the beginning in the first year we had eight thousand new clients.

McFarlane And by the time you left?

Curlin We had twenty thousand or maybe even more than that. The continuation rate was 71 percent.

McFarlane I've never heard of that.

Curlin Well, it was. I told you that we were treating side effects and the most of drop out was lost to follow up. You would go and there would be this terrible looking slum that was all built out of bamboo and then you'd go back for the follow up and it would be gone, all of it. Because people just picked up their walls and moved some place else when the police came and tried to run them off. So, that was the biggest reason for dropout was moved

away. We call that a drop out but that may not have been.

McFarlane You don't know what happened to them.

Curlin No.

McFarlane Um, okay, we've gone through Cairo. The mid nineties are a changing point in terms of the politics of this issue. Did that affect you?

Curlin You mean—

McFarlane Uh-huh, with the new congress in '94?

Curlin No, it didn't. The new congress did not. I think they did try but I don't think they were able to reinstate the Mexico City language or the gag rule.

McFarlane Did the flow of money to the CEDPA from U.S. AID change?

Curlin No.

McFarlane So, AID experienced metering but you did not?

Curlin Oh, we did experience metering.

McFarlane How did that work?

Curlin I would like to say it was ruinous, but it didn't seem to have—as I remember, it didn't seem to have too much effect. We were worried and concerned but we didn't actually have grants we couldn't pay in the field or anything like that.

McFarlane And money was flowing into you from AID pretty much the way it had?

Curlin Right.

McFarlane Well, there's been a change in administration since the—

Curlin Yes, hasn't there. And it—you know, the Mexico City was back. In addition to the Mexico City there was the gag rule that you couldn't even talk about abortion. Now that had not been true of the Mexico City language.

McFarlane I didn't realize that. Tell me—

Curlin You couldn't do abortion under Mexico City but you couldn't even talk about it as an option for people under the gag rule.

McFarlane Has that affected you as an organization?

Curlin No, it hasn't really. If it has, I don't know about it.

McFarlane And your organization signed the new Mexico City Policy. Have you lost any NGOs in the developing world?

Curlin We did lose one NGO in Peru and we may have lost one in Mexico, a feminist organization. But our African programs and our Asian programs were not lost even though India has legalized abortion. Again we sort of distance ourselves—we do the training but the state ministry of health in U.P. whereas the focus of our work is technical assistance. So of course it doesn't apply to them.

McFarlane Right, because they're a government. We know the politics are different, but does the climate, the change in administration, affect you in other ways?

Curlin The climate is bad for family planning in general. I mean it's not just abortion it's really family planning that a lot of people are after.

McFarlane How do you know that?

Curlin Well, you know, Chris Smith has always been that way, the congressman from New Jersey. Another congressman, I think his name is Pitts, who is just rabidly anti-contraception. It's not so much what they have done to us although we did get cited I guess is the best way to put it and a complaint was sent to AID. They went through our website and I found out the night before this was going to happen that we did list abortion as one of the

options for an HIV positive woman and we did this in a training manual for religious leaders. (laughs) So, we did have to take that out. Because something small like that can really put you in big jeopardy. And also this person cited an ad in the *Washington Post*. We had had two ads running and the *Post* had juxtaposed part of one ad into another which looked like we were recruiting for an adolescent reproductive health advocacy specialist. We were recruiting for a population policy advocacy person and a reproductive health adolescent technical person. They sort of put them together. And this person who complained to AID said, “Why was AID paying for something like this?”

McFarlane What percentage of AID—I can look at your budget. Are they a major player in terms of—

Curlin Oh, yes. Our contract to provide technical advisors to USAID in AIDS in child survival which is about twelve million a year. And then the money we get in the field from AID.

McFarlane From the missions?

Curlin From the missions.

McFarlane Was there—your organization signed Mexico City, again, was there any board discussion of that?

Curlin Not really. Not really. We had already done it once and that was when we were really agonizing over it. And we signed it. I mean it was still a tough decision but other had to make the same decision.

McFarlane So, am I correct in inferring that there is some chilling effect of the current administration looking at your website?

Curlin Yes. I mean there was just no question about there being a chilling effect and there are also really mean conservatives who would love to catch you out and punish you severely.

McFarlane Is this different from what you experienced in the eighties?

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane What do you—how do you explain that to yourself?

Curlin Well, it's beyond my comprehension. But in a way, it's like, Things have been too easy for you and we want to show we're in charge now—you have to do what we say. Although at our level within AID the people are mostly technical people who've been there through all of this. So we don't find this true in AID. And as we deal with the political people, who are political appointees in AID, they're not really like that, either, but it's more outside people, like Heritage Foundation people, those kinds of people, who complain to AID and then AID has to do something.

McFarlane That's how it works?

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane Does your board buffer you from any of this?

Curlin No.

McFarlane Maybe you'd like to say a few words about working with the board especially because of your different leadership paradigm.

Curlin Well, our board has changed over time. It started out being a competency board. People who had credentials in the areas we worked in. And it's changed over time to be more of a fundraising board and to represent a more corporate approach. I think the board is very committed and has a fair

understanding of what we do because we have traveled with them. We went to Egypt and then last year we went to Guatemala. And CEDPA's work is complex. And unless you see it, it's very hard to read about it or hear me talk about it and really understand it. But when you get out in the village, you know exactly what we've done. You can see it in people's faces.

McFarlane That was a question that I wanted to ask. There seems to be diversity in the projects you do around the world. What's the theme or motto that ties them together?

Curlin Well, they're all locally designed. We don't have a cookie cutter that we give to people. We don't design projects. We will get partners together and say, This is what we're doing, we have this amount of money, what should we do with it? What do you think would be the most useful thing if our goal is to get girls back in school or keep girls from marrying early? That sort of thing. And so this project that was designed in Egypt, for example, the NGOs, mostly headed by alumni, took on the role of training and facilitators for community-based NGOs, which are almost impossible to reach. They would have been impossible for us. And they trained them and it is those community-based organizations that provided the teachers for these girls' classes. It's Better Life but it's called New Horizons because Better Life doesn't translate well into Arabic. And they have a program for parents. They have a scholarship program for girls who want to go to school, and they have what we call a "positive deviancy approach" to eliminating FGC, female genital cutting.

McFarlane Can you explain positive deviancy?

Curlin (laughter) Sounds awful. It is a technique developed in Indonesia for nutrition. If I go into this village and I want to give an illustration of good nutrition, I would look around and pick out the fat babies and ask their mothers to get up and tell the group what she feeds them and how she cares for that baby. And in our work in FGC it's asking the fathers and the mothers who have not circumcised their girls how they made that decision, how they came to that conclusion that they wouldn't—because in Egypt about 90 percent of women are circumcised.

McFarlane So, what context are these fathers and mothers—

Curlin In parent's clubs that are connected with the New Horizons project.

McFarlane Is that socially acceptable for them to even admit that?

Curlin I have found that it is we who have hang-ups. Whatever they decide is generally socially acceptable. And I tell you a little story that happened right before the board went out there. These NGOs are very careful to deal with the local ministry people like the director of social affairs for example and tell them what they're doing and how they're doing it invite them to come to sessions with the girls. But they had replaced somebody in Beni Suef, which was going to be a stop on our tour. And he had a fit. And he went to the newspaper and said that CEDPA has introduced all these western ideas and that they are alarming and will cause the girls to be promiscuous.

McFarlane And he worked for CEDPA?

Curlin No, no, he worked for the ministry.

McFarlane Oh, okay.

Curlin Local-level ministry. We were going to take all the board down there. But as

it turned out years ago we had done a training program for governor's wives in Egypt and one of our NGOs who was in that training program called up the governor's wife and said, "Peggy's coming and she's bringing these people and this is what this man is saying." And it was the most artfully done thing I've ever seen in my life because the governor had never been to that town. And suddenly we come and the governor comes in a big Mercedes with Mrs. Governor and he greets us most fondly and not another thing was ever said. He never said anything about this article in the newspaper. He didn't scold the ministry person but by the time we left this ministry guy was kissing our feet. (laughs) But it was just that show of approval that was absolutely necessary for us to save that program in that town. And it's that kind of mobilizing the community that works. It took us two years before we had the first girl. But that was all the background and talking to everybody getting everybody on board, having parents meetings and when they had this article in the newspaper the parents and some of the teachers went to that man and said, "CEDPA didn't do this, we wrote this curriculum. This is what we designed." And it was true. They had not designed it but they had adapted it.

McFarlane So, the way positive deviance is working is the parents of the girl are talking.

Curlin To other parents.

McFarlane Is it working?

Curlin Yes, it is. It's not a hundred percent by any means. It was explained to me by a friend of mine who had been circumcised as she said, "You know, your mother wanted the best for you so she sent you to college. My mother

wanted the best for me so she circumcised me.” You know, it’s not a simple thing. And those American women who call it a barbaric custom were resented.

McFarlane Where was this?

Curlin This was in the Nairobi Women’s Conference in ’85.

McFarlane And the women said to them?

Curlin Yes. Because there are two sides to it. We do a lot of things that are harmful.

Why do we circumcise boys? Is that really a necessity of life? It’s a custom we’re used to. They don’t even ask you in the hospital whether you want your little boy circumcised or not. Stop and think about the things that we do just because it’s traditional. It’s not a whole lot different although there’s nothing more abhorrent than female genital cutting. But it used to be called female genital mutilation and it’s not called that because that’s pejorative. And what we’ve tried to do with the anti-FGC projects, in four of five African countries is devise a strategy that overcomes it without condemning it. There is a project called BARFO in the Gambia, where they have a celebration, a girl’s coming of age celebration, and the girls all bring presents to the cutters so that she doesn’t lose face and she’s not losing income and the girls are not being circumcised. That’s what local design does for you is that I would never have thought of that strategy but they realized that this loss of face was important and that it was a ritual. It was just as much as we christen a baby that those girls really wouldn’t have a good send off from childhood to womanhood without that being marked by some kind of ritual.

McFarlane Interesting. So, it’s an example of the powerful design of your work.

Curlin Absolutely, and I've always said this about our work is that we deal in strategies, not in guidelines because there is a strategy that will work in one situation but would be crazy to use in another.

McFarlane So you're teaching women strategy here?

Curlin And to be analytical. And that's something that isn't taught in school in most developing countries.

McFarlane What do you mean being analytical?

Curlin Think about the situation, analyze the situation: what are the motivating factors? Why do people do what they do without just accepting it on face value? And how to look at data. Most rural family planning programs for example never look at their own data.

McFarlane And you're teaching that?

Curlin Yes, indeed we are.

McFarlane How do you do that?

Curlin Well, I tell you there's nothing more rewarding than to turn to the little chart on the wall and say, you know, we had this many girls in the school last year and this year we've got this many. I mean, it's just a joy.

McFarlane So, that's a real outcome measure.

Curlin Yes. And then we're trying to institute more in-depth impact. What if the girl goes through school then what does she do? And that's where it becomes hard because in India, where we've been the longest with the Better Life program, the girls move off and leave the village because they go to their husband's home. They're very hard to track sometimes.

McFarlane So, over time that—yeah.

- Curlin** They get lost into follow up.
- McFarlane** But you're working on improving their evaluation?
- Curlin** Yes, yes.
- McFarlane** That's some of your current work?
- Curlin** Yes.
- McFarlane** Can you—of all the things you've done can you summarize what you think is your most important work or achievement?
- Curlin** I heard Mustari Khan, the director of Concerned Women say once that the secret of Concerned Women's success is that they just loved their clients. I thought that was true. They do love them. You can tell that when you go out with the field workers, they know the client, they hold them, they say, How's the old husband that was beating you last week: do you need me to come and talk to him? I will. I'll come and talk to him. But the achievement I'm my most proud of is the friendships that I've made and the way people have let me into their lives. I don't need another award, I've always said that at CEDPA I've gotten a reward everyday. There was always a sense of fulfillment.
- McFarlane** On the other side of the coin what do you see as your most difficult work?
- Curlin** Well, I think that there have been in terms of staff happiness. It's more difficult as a woman manager. There are different expectations of you than there would be if you had been a man. And it's hard to live up to those expectations. I don't know how many times in the course of my work I've been told by junior staff, Well, we talk about empowering women: how about us? You know, why can't I make the decisions? Because we are a

participative, because there is a team spirit here, it's awfully tempting for staff to say, What about me—

Tape 4, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.

Curlin It's all about the women we serve not ourselves. You know, maybe there's a generation gap there.

McFarlane Could there be a cultural gap in terms of American culture versus—

Curlin Well, I think that's true too. All we older women say that younger women think they can have it all in the work place and home and with children. But to me it's not about what I can do for staff it's what staff can do for those women who have no hope unless we do something.

McFarlane So that's been frustrating. Do you think you've been confronted in ways a man wouldn't have been confronted?

Curlin I think there've been expectations of me. I've never been confronted in a bad way.

McFarlane But I thought this was about empowerment.

Curlin Just the other day a staff person was making a trip to Egypt to do some training and she was going to take her baby and she wanted us to pay the insurance for the baby, I mean the evacuation insurance in case something happened. And it's not part of our fringe benefits because most people don't travel with babies. But I agreed to do so because she's breastfeeding. And then I put a cap on this, what we would pay, and she was angry that we didn't pay everything and she had to pay twelve dollars. She said, "Well, you're always talking about breastfeeding. I need to take my baby to breastfeed." The baby is nine, ten months old and she could have waited to

go until the baby was older.

McFarlane But that—this part of it affects you.

Curlin I think it's because I want to do everything. But I tend to be pretty bottom line oriented. And I am not profligate with the money. I am saving every cent that I can to have it spent in the field. And it's also been a transition between being very Washington centric to having field offices which are running their own affairs. It's been hard for people here. And I understand it because I've been out in the field. I've worked in the field but I've also been out and seen what they can do in the field offices and feel a hundred percent as if we are doing the right thing by transferring the decision making to the field from here.

McFarlane I'm sorry. So you're in the process of doing more than that transferring more authority to the field?

Curlin Yes.

McFarlane Is this an extension of your management philosophy and resolve, that evolution?

Curlin Yes, yes, and it's also in our strategic plan.

McFarlane Oh, okay. So the board came up with this?

Curlin No, because I have such respect for people in the field and feel they are so capable that it would be ridiculous for us to be running the show from here. There are certain things we need to help with, but I don't think that we need to have people dropping out of the sky doing two weeks of technical assistance and then coming back home not having really known where they were working or what they were supposed to be doing. It's been great joy to

see these offices develop and have such good leadership and such good technical people. And now they're getting their own money.

McFarlane Oh, they are?

Curlin Yes, you know, we help but they're able to make connections with AID, with other donors, and understand what they want, write a proposal that we polish, and carry out the program.

McFarlane This is really not a jealous mother organization?

Curlin Anything but. Well, it's a proud mother organization. (laughter) A very proud mother. But, you know, that's just my orientation. I am oriented toward the field and the one thing that as president I was guilty of is that I never gave up programs. I couldn't. It was beyond me. I never gave them up and I always remained very into what was going on in the field. And one of the big downers in my life was having to have my knee replaced and not being able to travel for over a year. I just felt stale. I felt like I was missing everything.

McFarlane So you missed—you had traveled a great deal a lot of your time?

Curlin I did.

McFarlane Do you have any kind of general words about managing programs and of this type population programs kind of?

Curlin Cairo proves that an approach that is women centered and based on the empowerment model is both effective and more sustainable. And I really feel that we shouldn't go back on that. I'm so worried that we will go back on Cairo because to me it is as near a perfect document as exists. And of course that maybe because I helped craft it, but I really think it is a perfect

example of how an international UN agency can really be ahead of the curve, can push the field in a very positive way. And I don't see that happening very often. Maybe Rio [the environment conference] did. Beijing took a lot of the language from Cairo while obviously it did push forward the field of women's empowerment. It didn't tie up the ends the way Cairo did. There's reproduction, there's production, there are legal rights, land rights, all of it important to women's lives. If you spend much time at all in a village in the developing world that's the only thing that could possibly be imagined that would work. I get most of my information is from seeing it. And I feel I'm stimulated intellectually when I travel. I really do. I don't like this politicking and I don't like the theorizing and fighting about ideas.

McFarlane You like the doing.

Curlin I like the doing and the seeing and the testing. I guess if I have a method of development it is really the Socratic method. I'm a question asker. And that has been a very wonderful way to get people not only to answer a question but more importantly to think about the question.

McFarlane I'm going to ask you about the other side too. What would you say to people in the future about population politics? I mean you still have to deal with them, don't you?

Curlin Yes, you do. You know, what I would say to anybody in population or anybody else is that you have to do the right thing. You cannot live your life afraid that you're going to be unjustly accused of doing something because as my grandmother always said, "Right will out." It may not do it right away but you really have to live with yourself in final analysis. And there will be

politics always because there are some strongly held opinions. But if you do what's right at least you're satisfied. Other people may not be satisfied or agree but you can feel that to the best of your knowledge and given the options that were available you did the right thing. And that's always the way. I mean we talk about that when we hire somebody. It may not be the best person but at the time it seemed the best thing to do.

McFarlane Do you have—are there other recommendations about people who will plan and manage Population, Women's Development programs in the future? Are there recommendations you would make to people?

Curlin You mean about the personalities or specific people?

McFarlane What would you say to people who are managing or planning Population programs or Women and Development or development programs in the future?

Curlin I would say you have to be participatory. You have to be the learner. You'll never have the edge. You'll never know something that nobody else knows. The fun is participating in that learning process.

McFarlane I sense a certain amount of humility here.

Curlin (laughs) Well, I'm sure there would be people who would differ.

McFarlane What you were saying?

Curlin I'm not afraid to say what my strengths are or what my weaknesses are either, but I'm also conscious of where the fulfillment for me is. And I know a lot of things. I know a lot and I have learned them from people, not from anything I have read or very little I guess that I've read. But I can tell you that God has given me one gift and that is I remember the alumni's name. I

can call it like this.

McFarlane How many are there?

Curlin Five thousand.

McFarlane (laughs) It's a gift.

Curlin It is but it goes to show what an impression they have made on me and what I've learned from them. I've seen them operate politically like a ballerina. You know like this—Salha Awad went down to Beni Suef and got the governor's wife to come. It was so smooth I can't tell you. Nobody criticized anybody. Nobody said anything to anybody. It was just done by innuendo and I think, My god, Where did you learn to do that? And I wish I could do that. I wish I could do it.

McFarlane There were a couple of questions I had from the earlier tape when you were talking about the crackdown and the blood at the university. You said it was this thick and we need to put something on tape about—

Curlin (laughs) The hallway was at least an inch deep in blood. And then it was splattered all over the walls coming down the steps.

McFarlane Is there anything else you'd like to say in terms of your work and this project which is really going to be providing examples for people in the future?

Curlin I feel like the one thing that I have learned is that women are the futurists. Women think ahead because, they have babies and because they have to feed a family and I would say that women managers start with a big plus by their names because they are taught to plan I also think that that's been so successful in terms of producing women leaders because they already knew so much and were socialized the way boys weren't. And that has been, I

think, one of the real leading successes of what we had done with women's leadership.

McFarlane To capitalize on that.

Curlin To capitalize on that and to go even a step further and to make people feel they've got tremendous potential. And I think there's one thing about having options and potential and there's another thing about thinking that you do, that your dreams can come true but first there has to be a dream. I hope that whoever is working in the future will work more and more with youth, boys and girls because girls can't change and leave these boys behind. So we're doing training for both in the Better Life program because unless we change the stereotype that people hold of each other we'll be in the same big mess a hundred years from now. But when it happens it's really exciting because the whole idea of partnership is something I really do believe in. And I believe in it in marriage and I believe in it in work and I believe in it in development. There is no development without being a partner.

McFarlane Thank you very much.

End of interview