

# A Journey From A Single-Wide Trailer To The White House

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*By Dorothy L. Espelage*

**A**s a “military brat” growing up in Virginia Beach, I never imagined that I would find myself in my career sitting in White House conferences advocating for youth and their families in the United States. In fact, I largely lived in survival mode day to day, so that did not leave time to day-dream about the future. My stepfather was career Navy and was gone six months of each year, and my mother a waitress who struggled with depression, which left me and my siblings largely unsupervised and on our own most of the time. However, our street block was filled with military and civilian families with a lot of kids and the neighborhood would turn out to be a source of protection for us. There were many positive adult role models like my friends’ parents who provided us with spaces that were safe, consistent, and nurturing. There begins my journey through a multitude of experiences with protective adults, including our neighbors, babysitters, girl scout leaders, coaches, teachers, and librarians.

## **The Big Chill**

Throughout my childhood, I was intrigued by human existence, the meaning of life, and found myself analyzing the behaviors of everyone around me. A

career in psychology came as a natural option given my obsession with the human psyche. However, career or vocational training in my house was limited to the roles of my parents—an enlisted military father and a mother who was a waitress. What these two roles had in common was they both required a strong work ethic and an ability to get up early and work with a wide range of individuals. That is where my strong work ethic was spawned, but I really had to turn to television to get exposure to other professions. Television in the 1970s did not offer many career options for girls and women, so it was not until the 1980s when I started to explore career ideas. In 1983 (a perfect time to start thinking about college), a movie called *The Big Chill* was released and it was my first exposure to a wide range of professions. For those of you who have not seen this movie, it is about a group of college friends who graduated from the University of Michigan and come together for a friend's funeral. This friend killed himself. He was a scientist who battled with the meaning of life and depression. These friends spend the weekend following the funeral catching up for lost years, partaking of libations, listening to Motown music, and questioning how they lost sight of their social justice intentions and ended up "selling out." The cast of characters includes a female doctor, a female lawyer who was going to save inner-city families but took a job with a corporate law firm, a writer who instead of finishing his novel writes for a well-known celebrity magazine, an actor who plays a detective, a writer who gave up writing stories to be a stay-at-home mother and wife, and finally an injured Vietnam vet (Nick) who always dreamed of having a family but sustained an injury that makes that an impossibility. This loss has left him empty and closed off from society.

As you can see, this movie was an excellent introduction to several careers that I could consider as a woman from a working-class and military family. But one scene really stuck with me. Nick spends most of the weekend filming himself and interviewing his friends about their experiences after college. In one of the scenes, Nick plays the role of interviewer and interviewee and pretends to interview himself. At one point, the interviewer says something to the effect of, "So you are ABD in clinical psychology from the University of Michigan? How is it that you cannot finish the dissertation," to which he replies, "I *chose* not to finish the dissertation." What was ABD? At that time there was no Internet to look this up quickly and it was not listed in the encyclopedias that we had on the bookshelf at home, so I had to wait until I got to school the next day. The first thing I did when I got to school was go straight to the library to get a book on doctoral programs in psychology and ask my librarian about the term ABD. For the next few years, I would watch this movie over 100 times; I analyzed every conversation and dissected each character. I analyzed the ways in which each character interacted

and how they made sense of their life decisions. Sam, the divorced actor, regretted having an affair in his marriage and was fearful that he would not be a good father to his children. I watched how Nick was so troubled by his experiences in Vietnam and his way of coping was to push everyone away from him. I was fascinated by how the characters blamed themselves for their friend's suicide. They each thought they could have prevented it. I watched how Meg, the female corporate lawyer, regretted that she put her career first and now had to figure out how to have a child. I learned several things that still resonate with me today: (a) Life is not fair; (b) most careers come with sacrifice; (c) career-oriented women are treated differently than men; (d) life is not endless; (e) success requires hard work; and finally, (f) I wanted to be in a career that gave back to society.

These characters motivated me to keep working hard in school because I wanted to be successful and I wanted to go to college. I did not want to wait tables after college. I wanted more. I enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) math and science classes when given the opportunity. There were only six of us in my high school AP classes, and we became very close. All of us had the same goal in mind—to attend college. But I wanted to set myself apart from them. I convinced my science teacher that I should take an independent research class to conduct a science experiment. Each Sunday night I watched *60 Minutes*; I remember watching a segment on the preservatives in hot dogs (e.g., sodium phosphates) and how they are linked to diseases. I remember going to the library searching for research on these preservatives. I spent mornings and weekends designing an experiment to test the impact of monosodium glutamate (MSG) and phosphate on the offspring of fruit flies called *Drosophila*. Only now do I recognize that I designed a randomized clinical trial when I randomly assigned the fruit flies to different levels of MSG (e.g., .001, .01, .05 concentrations). My study hypotheses were supported—fruit flies who were exposed to the highest levels of MSG had offspring with impaired wings. I recall going to a lab at a local college to examine the wings of the offspring.

### **One-Way Trip To The City—Richmond, Virginia**

We now fast forward to 1986, my senior year in high school. As a student athlete in AP classes, it was only natural that my teachers assumed I would apply for college. But college was never discussed in my house, despite the fact that I was in AP classes, competed in math competitions, and won science awards for my experiments with fruit flies. But a small miracle happened. I was walking in downtown Roanoke, Virginia, and saw a sign for an

open house for Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond. I convinced my cousin Robin to go with me, and we were encouraged to apply. Having no idea what I was doing, I applied, and several months later I received a letter of acceptance. Robin got in, too. We were headed to the city and capital of Virginia. I worked that summer on the lake to save money for college and was excited for the next chapter of my life.

That summer, my stepfather died of Agent Orange exposure at the age of 52 as a result of three tours in Vietnam. Because he spent 30 years in the military, and because the military recognized that his death was due to Agent Orange, they offered us compensation—if you will—for his service. This came in the form of \$400 a month toward educational expenses for his stepchildren. I was able to go to college because of this \$400 plus a waitress position at Bob's Big Boy the first year of college and then a transfer to work at the JW Marriott in Richmond for the following four years. Yes, I took five years, for several reasons. First, I could never register for classes in advance because I had to make money during the school breaks to pay my tuition and books. Thus there were times when I could not get into classes. Second, I had to work Friday nights and doubles on Saturday and Sunday (start time 5:30 a.m.; end time 11 p.m.), so I was never able to take a full load, as there was no time on weekends to study. But I was grateful to be in college.

When Robin and I arrived in Richmond to pick a major and register for classes, there were no computers at registration, only a large hall filled with tables with signs for the various majors—math, physics, education, biology, psychology, and so on. My mind went right back to *The Big Chill* and I then reflected on my interests and successes. I loved math and competed in math competitions. But I thought it might be too hard for me to be math major. I won competitions for my experiments with fruit flies, where I randomly assigned them to various levels of MSG. But I wasn't sure I wanted to consider being a female scientist. To this day, I am not sure why I hesitated to pursue a degree in a hard science. Perhaps there wasn't enough encouragement at home. What about Nick and his doctoral work in clinical psychology? Yes, that I could do. I walked briskly over to the psychology table and registered for college classes!

## Search For Research Opportunities

I had done enough research on doctoral programs in psychology to know that I needed to conduct research as an undergraduate student to be competitive for graduate programs, especially because I was at a state school, not

a private school, which was not seen as particularly strong in undergraduate education. So in my normal assertive and socially skilled fashion, I started knocking on doors to ask about joining labs. I found myself first working in a “rat lab,” where I was a research assistant for Professor Robert Hamm who ran a federally funded lab that tested the effects of components of anti-anxiety medications. I enjoyed my time there but really fell in love with research when I started to work with Professor Shari Ellis in her developmental psychology studies. Her research focused on peer relations, and more specifically, friendships. She gave elementary school children tasks to create conflict and these interactions were videotaped for later coding. This was my first introduction to research outside of a research laboratory and my first introduction to human subjects research. I had found my calling. Not only did I want to be a clinical psychologist, but I wanted to also focus on developmental psychology. After spending hours of watching and coding interactions between friends and enemies in these videos, I started to value the potential restorative nature of friendships.

Please note that my love for math continued, so I took calculus classes for fun at VCU. There was something about the finality of solving a math problem that excited me. Despite Professor Farley’s (my calculus professor) attempts to persuade me to pursue graduate study in math, I did not have the confidence to make that change. Thus I was off to create a competitive resume for graduate school.

## Next Challenge: Graduate School Applications

Professor Ellis was instrumental in my applying for graduate school, and she gave me what turned out to be the best advice: “In addition to applying for PhD programs in clinical psychology, apply also to a few master’s programs as a backup.” I applied to the top U.S. PhD programs in clinical psychology—and did not get into any of them. But I did get into several terminal master’s programs, including one in Virginia, Radford University, which was close to my family. In a small program of only 12 students, I found myself in graduate school pursuing a degree in clinical psychology. But I was not there to get a terminal degree; I was there to prepare for my PhD applications that would be going out the following fall.

I had to get to work. I needed to find a professor who was willing to supervise my master’s thesis, but this was not easy in a teaching institution. After knocking on many doors, I found Professor Jeffrey Chase, who was willing to help me design, conduct, and write a research study. We

designed an experimental study using the Stroop color-naming interference task, which requires individuals to name the color of a word (e.g., red); an interference is created because the word is blue but displayed in red font. So, I adapted this to screen women with and without eating disorders to see how much interference was created when they had to color-name words related to eating and body image. I randomly assigned these women to a neutral condition or eating-disordered Stroop tasks. The outcome was how long it took them to name the color of the words. As hypothesized, women with eating disorders were delayed when color-naming eating-disordered or body-related words (e.g., cake, toilet, vomit, fat) in comparison to the neutral group and in comparison to women without disorders. I fell further in love with hypotheses and analyzing data. Although we submitted this for publication, it was rejected, but I learned a lot in the process.

## Round Two: Graduate School Applications

The second time was the charm, but it would not come without a major challenge. During my graduate study at Radford University, I took classes with students in counseling psychology, so I came to understand the differences between clinical and counseling psychology. I was so excited to have been introduced to the field of counseling psychology because it seemed to focus on the strength of humanity, in comparison to clinical psychology, which focused more on psychopathology. So this second time around, I applied to both clinical and counseling psychology PhD programs and was really excited when I got invited for an interview at Indiana University. My sister Sarah had agreed to drive with me to the Midwest in the middle of winter. I would first interview for a clinical psychology program in Chicago and then we would make our way to Bloomington, Indiana. I recall saying to myself, "A snowstorm? How bad could it be?" I was determined to make it to Indiana University for the interview. As a purposeful planner, I ensured that we left Chicago early to allow for plenty of time to get to the interview. This was a smart decision, because only one lane was open on the interstate from Chicago to Bloomington, and we encountered whiteout conditions. It took us over six hours to get to Bloomington, but we made it. It was not a snowstorm but a blizzard. I found my way to the education building and learned that I was the only applicant who made it, although several faculty members were there. As I recall, I interviewed with Professors Bell, Kurpius, Froehle, and Ridley, among others. Indiana University would be my home for the next three years.

## Now The Journey Gets Real

Now that I found my way into a PhD program in counseling psychology, the journey continued at breakneck speed. During my master's program at Radford University, I spent a lot of time talking to professors in the various programs to see how they ended up at a teaching university versus a research university. I learned that there were a number of skills I would need to be competitive for an academic position in a research-intensive university. These included developing strong quantitative research skills, mastering writing and managing grants, and learning to write for publication. I was off. I enrolled in every quantitative class available and quickly learned who on campus was grant funded and inquired about working in their lab. I was successful in finding a well-known child clinical psychology faculty member. Professor Alexandra Quittner was doing work in the area of eating disorders but was largely working with families managing cystic fibrosis. Her scholarship was heavily funded by the National Institutes of Health, which gave me an opportunity to learn about this funding agency. To maximize my exposure to her studies, I took a lab coordinator job when it opened up. At the same time, I was hired as a graduate student to evaluate a violence prevention program for Professor Kris Bosworth. This project was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which would be a federal agency that would support my work in years to come. My three years at Indiana University also allowed for great mentorship from Professors Froehle and Ridley, two counseling psychology faculty members who encouraged me to write for publication and to network within our profession and beyond. Within three years, I had learned about building a federally funded research program and how to manage a laboratory and supervise undergraduate and graduate students, and I had started to appreciate the challenges associated with publishing. Through the mentorship of Professors Quittner and Bosworth, I carved out two lines of research that were keeping me busy with ideas: (a) assessment in eating disorders and (b) school-based bullying.

## Next Step: Tenure-Track Position In A Research I University

In October 1996 I was several months into my predoctoral internship at the Durham VA Medical Center, and it was time for the next step in my journey—time to apply for a tenure-track job at a research-intensive university. Although I enjoyed some aspects of clinical work, I felt that direct

clinical work with no research component left me unfulfilled at the end of the day. I wanted to have a greater impact on societal issues like eating disorders and youth aggression. I submitted applications for tenure-track positions all over the country. To my surprise, several weeks after searches closed, the phone rang. It was Professor James Rounds from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, a faculty member in one of the highest ranked PhD programs in counseling psychology. I could hardly talk to him—I was in shock! “Yes, I can make an interview on December 6th.” The interview consisted of two long days of meetings and a job talk. The job talk was well-attended and there were several challengers in the audience who made sure I was on my toes. I guess I passed the test of these senior faculty members who appeared to have their own agenda, which is best summarized as attempting to have me fall on my face. That was not going to happen. Life had thrown me too many challenges to give up now. I recall flying out of Champaign after the interview, feeling exhausted but also myself smiling as I reflected on my journey up until this point. Not two days later, the phone rang and I was offered the job! Little did I know when I flew out of Champaign that it would be my academic home for the next 20 years.

## Over Two Decades Of Scholarship To Impact Policy

Here I am a counseling psychologist and endowed professor of educational psychology with over 22 years of research experience in the area of peer victimization and bullying. I have conducted over 30 school-based survey studies to identify risk and protective factors of bullying, peer victimization, sexual harassment, homophobic teasing, and dating violence. I have secured over \$7 million in external funding, and the portfolio is growing. The most comprehensive investigation was funded by the CDC—a three-year, longitudinal study on the intersection of bullying, sexual violence, and now dating violence (funded by the National Institute of Justice) among a large, diverse sample of middle and high school students. I was also principal investigator on another CDC-funded grant that was a three-year, randomized, clinical trial evaluation of a bullying-prevention curriculum in 36 middle schools and involved 3,600 sixth-grade students. This work was extended into a currently funded CDC grant evaluating a social-emotional learning program in another 28 schools, with a focus on working closely with school staff to recognize and prevent violence.



## **School-Based Bullying Involvement: Social-Ecological Investigations**

Prior to my work, research on school-based bullying was limited, and what was being studied focused on individual characteristics of the youth involved. I introduced the field to the notion that school-based bullying is best understood from a social-ecological perspective, in which bullying is viewed as behavior that emerges and is maintained through complex interactions among multiple socialization agents. As principal investigator, my cross-sectional and longitudinal investigations include targeting individual characteristics (Espelage, 2004), familial influences (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2001; Espelage, Low, Rao, Hong, & Little, 2014), and environmental factors (Espelage, Polanin, & Low, 2014) as pertinent correlates of bullying during early adolescence. These studies are heavily cited and are the basis of many prevention programs.

## **School-Based Bullying Involvement: Social Network Analysis Studies Point To Peers**

My early work on bullying (Espelage & Asida, 2001) suggested that bullying during early adolescence is a group phenomenon where cliques of students seek out victims. As principal investigator, I designed several rigorous investigations to examine systemically the influence of aggression within peer groups during early adolescence. In several network studies (Espelage, Green, & Polanin, 2012; Espelage, Green, & Wasserman, 2007; Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003), we found support for the homophile hypothesis that youth who engage in these behaviors socialize one another to adopt the same behaviors. This scholarship has been used to argue for prevention programs that address the peer norms around bullying during early adolescence.

## **Bullying Is A Precursor To Sexual Harassment During Middle School**

Until recently, research on bullying among middle school youth did not consider how it might be related to sexual harassment. In fact, much of this scholarship has focused on high school and college samples. As principal investigator of several longitudinal studies, my colleagues and I found that bullying is causally linked to the use of homophobic language and

perpetration of sexual harassment as early as sixth grade (Espelage, Basile, De La Rue, & Hamburger, 2014; Espelage, Basile, & Hamburger, 2012; Espelage, Low, Polanin, & Brown, 2013; Espelage, Van Ryzin, Low, & Polanin, 2015). These studies have been used to argue for the development of bully prevention programs that include discussions of sexual harassment in U.S. middle schools, which is an area that is virtually ignored in current school-based programs. This research is also driving bully policies at state and national levels.

## **Evaluations of School-Based Social-Emotional Learning Programs**

Despite the costs of bullying, the impact of bullying prevention programs in the United States has been disappointing, especially in middle schools. I have spent the last 10 years arguing for the implementation of evidence-based programs that have been developed for youth in the United States, rather than the common practice of adopting curriculum from other countries (Espelage, 2013). As principal investigator of three randomized clinical trials of school-based social-emotional learning, we published results showing significant reductions in aggression and victimization in U.S. middle schools (Espelage, Low, Polanin, & Brown, 2013, 2015). In addition, we found reductions of bullying perpetration among students with disabilities who completed the social-emotional learning program (Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2015). These studies are driving prevention efforts in schools across the United States by highlighting the need to develop and evaluate programs with American children, rather than adopting programs from other countries.

## **A Long Journey That Is Just Beginning**

Indeed, my journey continues and I believe I might just be getting started! I am proud of the some 35 PhD students who have worked in my lab and have gone on to do great things in academia at research and teaching institutions; those who are engaged in direct service at medical hospitals, veterans' hospitals, university counseling centers, government agencies, private sector organizations, prisons, and in private practice; and those who serve as psychologists in the military or run their own practice. My more than two decades at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign flew by because of these students who formed my academic families, and I am happy to say

that the families are growing, with these students nurturing the next generation of students (my academic grandchildren). My colleagues and mentors throughout the years at Illinois (you know who you are) and mentors across the world (you know, too) are all responsible for my success, and I will be forever grateful. As I think back to the single-wide trailer that I called home for so many years in Moneta, Virginia, and the old school bus where I would study for my high school exams, I am very appreciative of my journey.

These are the lessons I learned: (a) Take risks and do scary things where success is not guaranteed; (b) do things outside of your comfort zone; (c) hold tight to your values and do not back down when faced with adversity or resistance; (d) grant writing is a skill and an art, and it takes time to learn how to do this—keep writing; (e) ask for help and mentorship; (f) publishing requires persistence; (g) collaborate often; (h) not all people have your best interests at heart, so be careful; (i) there are people that you will work with who will take advantage of you and take credit for things they do not deserve; (j) not all individuals are good collaborators.

I also value the Virginia family that continues to support my work despite being so far away. Uncle Paul, thank you so much for your support. I will never forget when I left the White House Conference on Bullying in 2011 (yes, they let me in) and you called me to say that you were so proud of me. Cousin Robin Brown, it has been a long time since we walked the streets of Richmond at VCU. I am proud of your work in social services, and together we are helping families. Here is to my brother, who introduced me to science and math, and to telescopes (he made one in high school), and continues to encourage me in my work. Thanks to my sisters Sarah and Catherine, who brought into my life six nieces and nephews who remind me often that sometimes work is not the top priority (not that much, but enough), and play has to happen from time to time. Of course, I could not have done this without all of my awesome, fun colleagues and friends who inspire me every day. Finally, I am grateful for endless support from Ray and his beautiful children.

After 19 years at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, this “military brat,” who has moved many times, is faced with a scary thing. I accepted a position at the University of Florida and will move my entire family to continue my career there. I am following my own advice and taking a big risk to try something different. Many of my colleagues are intrigued by this decision to move. They asked, “How did this come about?” There are so many reasons: (a) In a state where the governor has no budget and does not value higher education or the sacrifices university research professors make to do this work, quality of life and family time suffer; (b) returning to a psychology department where they fund their graduate students is

attractive and might allow me to write less than 10 grants a year; (c) as I manage my Raynaud's disease, I decided that my health mattered; and (d) being close to the ocean is also attractive.

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