



THE MILTON H. ERICKSON FOUNDATION NEWSLETTER

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I N T E R V I E W

Robert B. Erickson

Interviewed By Marilia Baker

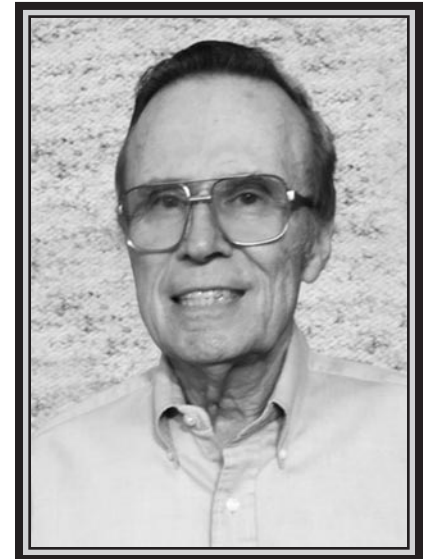
This interview features Robert Bruce Erickson, the sixth child (of eight) of Milton and Elizabeth Erickson. Robert was born in Detroit, Michigan where his father was director of psychiatric research and training at Eloise (Wayne County Hospital) near Detroit.

In the summer of 1948, when he was 3 years old, the Erickson family moved to Phoenix.¹

Eventually, Robert earned a master's degree in secondary education, and found his calling in teaching. For 36 years, he taught English, literature, and social studies in the Glendale Union High School District, in the metropolitan Phoenix area.

Robert and his wife, Kathy, have two sons, a daughter, and three grand-

children. His avocational interests include numismatics (coin collecting) and lexicography (the compilation of dictionaries). At an early age, his father encouraged him to pursue numismatics, which became a profitable activity that paid his college tuition. Robert is an active member of both the Society of Paper Money Collectors. Currently, he conducts tours at the Erickson Historic Residence, where he also assists with building and grounds maintenance. He plays a key role as liaison between the Erickson Historic



Robert B. Erickson

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Congress 2019

"A Vibrant Ritual for Renewing and Expanding"

This year, the Erickson Foundation will host the 13th International Congress on Ericksonian Approaches to Psychotherapy and Hypnosis, held December 12-15th, in Phoenix, Arizona at the downtown Hyatt Regency.

Nearly four decades ago in 1980, the first Erickson Congress was held. The initial goal for the first congress was to celebrate the contributions that Dr. Erickson made to the health sciences. Subsequent congresses have promoted the remarkable developments of the experts who have advanced the practice of therapy and health/mental wellness by using Erickson derived methods of hypnosis and psychotherapy.

Attendees of the congress will learn how to advance their treatment of various disorders, including anxiety, depression, PTSD, bad habits, and dysfunctional relationships. (See ericksoncongress.com for details.)

"I have participated in every Erickson Congress since the first in 1980," says Stephen Gilligan, one of this year's keynote speakers, "and they have been beautiful markers for professional development and growth. I was 25 years old when I presented at the first one, and it was an amazing experience. Such excitement in the air; such incredible diversity of people! A lot has happened since then, and I always look forward to each congress as a type of vibrant ritual for renewing and expanding on the amazing contributions of Milton Erickson."

Other keynote speakers at this year's congress are: Robert Dilts, Roxanna Erickson-Klein, Steve Lankton, Scott Miller, Bill O'Hanlon, and Michael Yapko.

The invited faculty are: Jorge Abia, Helen Adrienne, Ronald Alexander, Connirae Andreas, Marilia Baker, Norma Barretta, Rubin Battino, John Beahrs, Consuelo Casula, Carolyn Daitch, Tamer Dovucu, Joseph Dowling, John Dye, Helen Erickson, Jeffrey Feldman, Neil Fiore, Douglas Flemons, Steve Frankel, Teresa Garcia-Sanchez, Brent Geary, Tobi Goldfus, Eric Greenleaf, Bruce and Birgitta Gregory, Woltemade Hartman, Michael Hoyt, Wei Kai Hung, Carol Kershaw,

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INTERVIEW

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Residence and the Foundation.

Robert is the only child of Milton and Elizabeth Erickson's who remained in Phoenix throughout his adult life. In fact, he lives a short distance from where his parents lived on Hayward Avenue (now the Erickson Historic Residence). This provided Robert and his parents a mutually beneficial relationship throughout Dr. Erickson's productive twilight years, and his mother's equally active years of widowhood.

Over the years, Robert has experienced the growth and evolution of the Erickson Foundation. He and Kathy have never missed an Erickson congress! This year, as we celebrate the 40th anniversary of The Milton H. Erickson Foundation (incorporated in 1979), we also want to honor Robert Erickson for his behind-the-scenes salient roles.

Marilia Baker (MB): Your family lived on the grounds of Eloise hospital, which was customary at that time.² You mentioned an early childhood memory there. Could you please elaborate?

Robert Erickson (RE): What I can vividly remember is snow in

Eloise. As I recall, I was not yet 3 years old. I went to the door of our apartment, which opened on to a porch. The door had panes of glass which I could see through. I remember uttering something about wanting to play in the snow, and mother answering something like, "Let's see if it snowed last night." Then, I remember her dressing me in a snowsuit. I remember her having difficulty in getting my snow boots on. It seemed to take forever. I don't recall if I had any toys with me, except for a cane. Early in my childhood, I developed the habit of carrying a cane. I was clearly imitating my father, who walked with a cane.

MB: Did your family's move from Michigan to Phoenix bring about their interest in Native American culture, which is so apparent at the Erickson Historic Residence?

RE: For as long as I can remember, my mother was interested in the Native Americans of the Southwest, specifically the Navajo, whose major reservation is in Arizona. I know that my father had purchased some American Indian jewelry for her early on in their marriage. Mother was interested in the Navajo lifestyle, their history, culture, and crafts. She did a great deal of read-

ing on these subjects. As a family – excluding my father, who was always busy with patients – we would spend part of the summer traveling around the reservations. Mother would plan trips to coincide with ceremonies and cultural dances. We would also visit museums, ancient sites, and historical locations. We visited mountains, canyons, and regions that were of significance to the various tribes. My mother had an exquisite assortment of Hopi and Navajo jewelry, clothing, rugs, paintings, bolo ties for my father, and artifacts, including medicine bags, pouches, and fetishes.

MB: I understand that many of those adornments, crafts, and artifacts, including your father's collection of Seri Indian carvings, are housed in the Erickson Historic Residence at Hayward Avenue.

RE: Yes. Our home was always filled with interesting artifacts from many cultures. In the '70s, my father became fascinated with traditional ironwood carvings made by the Seri Indians of the Sonoran Desert of Mexico. Many of his students remember the large collection that he had of those wooden carvings, as well as the stories he liked to tell about the harsh condi-

tions where the native ironwood plant grows. My father made arrangements with a trader who visited the tribe and brought the art pieces to Phoenix. The trader agreed to give my father first choice of the carvings sold on behalf of the Seri tribe. That arrangement went on for several years. My father's collection grew as the tribe revived their traditional art of woodcarving that had nearly been lost to modern times.

MB: What a fascinating story. It is remarkable how Dr. Erickson contributed to human potential and development in so many ways. You remarked that family members often interacted with the patients and that there were household rules which involved the children and how they conducted themselves. You said that your father gave you important assignments for specific assistance with patients, even when you were very young.³ They sound like intriguing narratives with excellent therapeutic outcomes for the patients!

RE: My father began his private practice at 32 W. Cypress Street, shortly after it became our first home

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New!

DAVID KEITH-

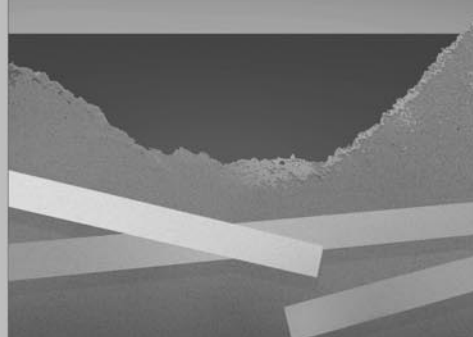


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in Phoenix. The main house rule was: “Don’t initiate conversation with patients but answer if they talk to you first.” To me, the patients seemed only like ‘people in passing.’

But when I was about 6 years old, my father called me into his office and introduced me to a man who I knew was a patient. I will call him Mr. B. The “B” is for bent, as in bent over. When he stood up, he was bent at the waist at a 90-degree angle. Consequently, his head was at the same level as mine, so when I talked with him, we were eye-to-eye. He was a much older man. I noticed wrinkles on his face, neck, arms, and hands. And Mr. B. had a cane, which he was dependent upon in order to keep from falling over.

My father instructed me to take Mr. B for a walk to Central Avenue. And as we walked, every time we passed under or beside a tree branch or bush that was tall and bushy, we were told that we should stop, and that I should reach up to touch the bush or tree branch, even though it may be beyond my reach. My father instructed Mr. B. to do the same. At first, Mr. B did this with difficulty, with only one arm because the other was holding the cane. This exercise was repeated on numerous occasions. For days, weeks, and even months, according to my father’s directives, we progressively increased the distances we walked. And as we continued taking these walks, I observed several things about Mr. B: First, we were walking faster each time. Second, Mr. B was walking more upright, and third, on some occasions, Mr. B would set his cane down on the ground, reach up, then pick up the cane and continue the walk.

MB: This is a classic example of one of Dr. Erickson’s action metaphors, which worked so successfully with patients. He would utilize the principle of ‘successive approximations’ toward an established therapeutic goal.

RE: The whole process was an adventure for me. Although I was with Mr. B, I felt as if I were in charge. I was able to explore the streets that I was otherwise only allowed to venture to with the presence of an adult or older sibling. And with Mr. B, I was the one making the decisions without one of my older siblings suggesting

that I wasn’t doing things the way they thought it should be done. I do not recall how many walks I took with Mr. B, or how long this directive of my father’s lasted, but I do remember seeing Mr. B walking more upright, and eventually he wasn’t even bent over anymore!

MB: How fortunate for this patient to have you – a 6-year-old – as a guide and companion in therapeutic outings. Such a wealth of intergenerational possibilities. Dr. Erickson knew very well what he was doing.⁴

RE: When I am conducting tours at the Historic Residence, I often talk about these interactions with my father’s patients. For example, when I was about 11 and my sister Roxie was 7, we were playing checkers in the front room [the waiting room for the patients]. As we played, one of the patients approached us, looked at our game of checkers and asked: “Do you know how to play chess?” When he found out that we did not know the game, he offered to teach us.

After his next appointment with my father, he presented us with a chess set and began instructing us. He was very thorough, starting with the name of each piece, describing the powers each chessman had. He made it clear that the final objective of the game is to call out “checkmate!” He was from out of state and had rented a nearby apartment so that he could see my father. He would always show up early for his appointments. When he arrived, at least one of us children were around, so he would give that child the next lesson in the game of chess. During the time he spent in Phoenix, he instructed us to play chess, including my older brother Allan, who was 15 at the time, me, my sister, Roxie, and even my youngest sister, Kristi, who was going on 6. We all ended up being reasonably good chess players and have continued to play over the years.

I like to relate this story to visitors touring the Historic Residence. In closing, I ask: ‘How many of you have had the patience and skills to teach children – ages 6, 7, 11 and 15 – the game of chess?’ Few have attempted to instruct children of those diverse ages how to play the game.

MB: Such an enriching experi-

ence, both for the children and for the patient. You mentioned another experience you had, which you called “an unusual encounter.” Will you tell us about that?

RE: With pleasure. When I was 12 years old, I was called into my father’s office in the middle of a session. This was unusual, as my father was, in general, punctual in seeing his patients, from hour to hour, with no interruptions. As I entered his office, he introduced me to a patient, who I will refer to as Miss S. She looked like she might be in her early 20s. I could tell she was wealthy. Her clothing and jewelry looked high class.

My father instructed me to guide the young lady out of the house, using only the backyard door, and to exit toward the alley behind our house. He

thing. He instructed me to observe the cars parked nearby or in the front of our house, and to make a note of the license plates and how many people were inside the cars. I did as I was instructed.

I reported to my father that I saw only one person, a lady, who looked to be in her mid-50s. She was probably Miss S’s mother. I also reported that the car she was driving was new, modern, and expensive looking, and that the license plate was from an eastern coastal state. My father thanked me. I never really thought about that experience and why my father had asked me to do that until later in life.

MB: Quite an intriguing maneuver. I am not only impressed by Dr. Erickson’s detailed instructions to you and the overall strategic design

*“Most of my father’s patients,
I would dismiss from my mind, as if nothing
unusual or out of the ordinary had taken
place.”*

further directed me to accompany her “toward 3rd Avenue to the end of our block.” This was about a quarter mile away. He continued: “There should be a taxi waiting for Miss S and she should board the taxi.” I was then told I should return home and tell my father all that had transpired.

As I walked with Miss S through the back alley, she began telling me how much she enjoyed talking to my father; how she “trusted” him; and how she knew she was “doing the right thing now.” I didn’t comment on her remarks but indicated that I was listening.

Following Miss S’s departure, I returned to the office, and reported what had occurred. My father thanked me but did not say anything about Miss S, or why she boarded the taxi. Immediately following my report, my father instructed me to go out our front door into the front yard and “do some busy work with the garden,” while simultaneously carefully observing every-

he had in mind—but also by your ability to recall those experiences in such detail.

RE: Most of my father’s patients, I would dismiss from my mind, as if nothing unusual or out of the ordinary had taken place. But this situation with Miss S was rather unique, as I had never been directed as I had been on that occasion. I did not forget about her because the assignment was so unusual. Years later, I read an article in the American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis written by my father. In the article he talks about, “...a young woman who was from a very wealthy family from an eastern coastal city.” It described the young woman as having parents who were overpowering and controlling in every aspect of her life. This left her feeling trapped. The article went on to say that one solution was for the young woman to break the ties with her family and to move away

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from home. I remembered Miss S as I read the article.

MB: Thank you Robert for a most insightful conversation. You are a treasure trove of information. We appreciate that you can bring these stories to light and give us an insider's perspective on how your father worked with people. Your contributions to the Erickson Historic Residence and to your parents' legacy are relevant to students, clinicians, educators, historians, and other professionals. We look forward to seeing you and Kathy in December at the Erickson Congress!

END NOTES

¹ Further read the compelling account of Elizabeth Erickson's driving her young children cross-country through 2,000 miles, from Eloise to Phoenix in the summer of 1948. In: Marilia Baker (2004) *A Tribute to Elizabeth Moore Erickson. Colleague Extraordinaire, Wife, Mother, and Companion*. Mexico

City: Alom Editores; pp. 63-64.

² For a detailed description and photos of the *Eloise hospital complex*, "a city in itself," see: Patricia Ibbotson (2002) *Eloise. Poorhouse, Farm, Asylum, and Hospital: 1839-1984*. In "Images of America."

Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing.

³ See: "How Milton H. Erickson encouraged individuality in his children" in (1988): *Developing Ericksonian Therapy: State of the Art*. Zeig J. & Lankton, S. (eds.). New York: Brunner/Mazel; Chapter 29, pp. 493-510.

⁴ Read Robert's personal experience in Rossi, E. L., Klein, R.E. & Rossi, K. L. (eds). (2008) *The Collected Works of Milton H. Erickson, Volume One. The Nature of Therapeutic Hypnosis. Chapter 9: "Further Clinical Techniques of Hypnosis: Utilization Techniques"*. Phoenix, AZ: The MHE Foundation Press. Example 13, pp. 291-292.

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