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LINDA – Fieldnotes – Wednesday, October 24, 2007

Subject: Interview with Sarah Wessler

Location: 5th floor on HCZ building.

Time: 4:03-5:10pm

Notes written up on Friday, October 26

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[Varenne and I really enjoyed this interview, which to use her word, was “fun.” Like the young people who came through the space, we wanted to come back. Sarah seemed quite frank, in no way threatened by the tape recorder or even about potentially sensitive information about HCZ or her funders.]

Varenne and I rode the bus to the HCZ building on 125th Street. As usual there was a security guard at the desk, but there were also a man and a woman sitting behind a table with small paper signs. One read “Learn to Earn,” and I’ve forgotten the other one. Also, children in uniform were coming in and out of the lobby.

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We were instructed to sign in, and rode the elevator as instructed. A woman got onto the elevator with us from the second (or third?) floor, and saw that we had already pressed number four. She was dressed in jeans, was caramel colored, and had long dyed brown braids. I don’t remember much else. When we got to the fifth floor she had to maneuver around us to get what was later revealed as a time card. We spoke one of the two women sitting at the front desk, the older one, and our elevator companion walked around us to punch the paper into a machine displaying the time on our right. [If she was due at her job at 4pm, she was only a few minutes late. But her anxiety seemed to indicate that this was frowned upon. Does HCZ treat its adult staff in authoritarian, paternalistic terms?]

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I told the older woman we were there to see Sarah Wessler, and she asked our names. I misheard, so Varenne provided our names. [Does this woman work for HCZ? Is Sarah’s the only program on that floor? Some questions for next time] The older woman got up, walking with a slight stoop. From what I can remember she also wore jeans.

She returned with Sarah, who introduced herself enthusiastically. [She seemed a bundle of positive energy after the people we had encountered.] Sarah wore a denim jacket over a printed button-down silk-ish shirt, brown with small and numerous white polka dots, and gray capris that cut off above the knee. Her hair was dyed bottle-blond on top with honey blond locks below, cut in layers with the longest layers just below her shoulders. She wore plastic eyeglasses, I think in black.

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Sarah led us into the space, the “Lehman Brothers Health Promotion Learning Lab,” as proclaimed on a sign hanging above the space. There were two young people, a girl and a boy who both looked in their teens, sitting and stuffing plastic bags. Sarah explained that they were preparing dental kits. [Can’t remember if this was the first time she used the

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term "Explainers."] She began telling us about an "installation" in the room, and at some point I interrupted her to ask if I could tape her. She said sure, and took the opportunity to do something on the other side of the room. I talked into the microphone until she came back, describing the installation she had just described. It showed a rainy street.

She explained that it was rainy because today was rainy, and that it picked up ambient noise. The more noise in the room the more cars and taxis appeared on the installation. Varenne seemed to enjoy this. She told us that it was useful for young people to regulate the noise level: when they noticed a lot of traffic, they would tell each other it was too noisy. But, she conceded, sometimes they noticed but did not change their noise level.

She also showed us some of the computers (at least 7, maybe more) running various screensavers that use unused computing power on distributed-computing projects. She and Varenne chatted briefly about them. I only recognized the name SETI.

Then she showed us another installation, running off one of the computers and a mat on the floor. I don't know what this is called, but when you move it reacts, this case by piling more balls onto a grid. Varenne also seemed to enjoy this.

She then moved us into an area with a carpet, another large flat screen, and some brightly colored, modish chairs/sofa. This screen was equipped with a camera, that picked up visual cues and integrated it into the image. She said that today, being cloudy, did not have enough light.

She then led us to a hallway with blond wood floors (to the left when coming in the front door). She gestured at the row of closed doors, saying that the clinic staff all leave at 4. She briefly explained that they provide some dental and limited medical care. She also gestured into an open door, the first door, where two young people sat in front of computers. She explained that this was the office for her program.

She then opened a locked door to the conference room, saying something about the door not propping open. We took seats, her beside me on the far side of the table from the door, Varenne catty-corner to her, and we continued talking for some time.

Some topics:

- various players: Children's Health Fund, Lehmann Brothers, HCZ
- resources, financial and otherwise
- activities
- recruitment of Explainers
- development of her program, only 1 ½ yo
- assessment, need to report back to funders
- serves mostly HCZ children at Promise Academy and elementary schools
- also outreach, mostly "one-off" programs
- many of HCZ's students do not come from Harlem; false addresses
- her background

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LINDA – Fieldnotes – Thursday and Saturday, October 25 and 27, 2007

Subject: Encounters with people on the street

Location: Frederick Douglass, between 120th and 123rd sts

Time: around 1pm, around 4:00pm

Thursday, October 25

I'm about to cross Douglass at 122nd when an elderly man in a faded black jacket and faded blue jeans calls out to me. I step out into the street when he says something like "Don't see many of your people around here." He says it in a friendly way, so I say something back to him and continue walking.

[Later, I think, I should stop and talk with people who make friendly overtures or comments, if they want to talk. I also think that until now, the only people who have talked to me on the street since I began this project are men who are hitting on me.]

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Saturday, October 27

Encounter with homeless man in wheelchair

Encounter with man and woman on 122nd Street

The homeless man first called to me at 121st and Douglass, from outside the liquor store I saw Red Coat go into last week. He asked, "Can you help me?" I mumbled "Sorry" as I hurried past.

There were a lot of people on 122nd. Young men, mostly. [I felt vaguely threatened—people looked at me but did not meet my eyes.]

The Halloween party was cancelled, moved to tomorrow. I made it to the garden and saw the sign, thought maybe I had gotten the day wrong or Haja had gotten the date wrong, and on my way back towards Douglass saw that nearly every door had a flyer announcing that the party would be *tomorrow*. Somehow I missed this on the way in. I decided to go to see if the next street, 123rd, also had those flyers.

On my way off of 122nd a man and woman were walking very very slowly ahead of me. I slowed down when I caught up to them. I looked up at a building on my right side, where a very dark, African-looking woman stood smoking a cigarette at the top of the stoop. She had a closed face. I noted that the door had no flyer on it and I quickly looked down.

Of the couple in front of me, the woman was much taller than me and wearing an enormous gray puffy jacket down to her knees. She had straightened hair that looked like a weave in a ponytail [looked too perfect]. The man was also tall, a little older, maybe 50s. He stopped, turned to the side [not quite facing me] and said, "Go ahead,

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sweetheart.” I thanked him softly, and walked past both of them. I heard the woman say, “Did I say thank you?” I must have misheard her because he said, “She did.”

On Douglass I ran into the man again. He joked, “Decided to come see me again, huh?” I liked that, and I now had time, so I turned around.

He was wearing a black knit cap, a black-and-gray plaid jacket, and had pants over the red long johns. His dark blue wheelchair had no visible motor. He had very dark skin, large rheumy eyes with a lot of yellow in the whites, and dry and cracked hands. He was thin, almost painfully so. He looked old, maybe in his 60s, but maybe living in the streets made him look older than he was.

He went into a long story about how he was just released from St. Luke’s [I think] pointing to his right leg, now a stump ending with a pair of red long johns tied into a knot not far below the hip. He started by saying that he’s not a panhandler, not looking for handouts. I let him talk briefly about being out in the elements and being wet, before asking him how *I* could help him. I was also conscious of the various passers-by, some of which may have seen me before. He said something about needing to get up to \$30, somebody just gave him enough to get some food, the first food he’s had [in the day? since being released?] and how he’s going to get a check and housing on Monday. [He named an amount of a few hundred dollars.] He said that he’d be able to pay it back, “with a little frosting on top.” I laughed at that too. I told him I didn’t have that much, and I hoped he would get up to \$30. I gave him \$5. He told me that he had asked another girl and said to her, “Am I invisible?” Because that’s how people made him feel. I murmured, “I can imagine, I can imagine.”

He gave me his name, James, and asked me mine. When I said it, he backed up, shouting, “Oh! Oh!” I asked him, “What did I say?” He started telling me about his older sister, who shared my name. I can’t remember what I asked him that got him to mention “my lawyer,” and I asked teasingly, you have a lawyer? He said he met a lawyer who gave him his card and said to call if there’s anything he could do.

Then he started talking about his family, 8 brothers and sisters, including a sister who is a professor in North Carolina. He hasn’t seen any of his family since 1988. He started crying talking about his amputation, and I got embarrassed and uncomfortable, especially with lots of people going by. He apologized and I suggested that we back off of the corner. [got the impression that it happened relatively recently, don’t know when]

He cried for a few seconds more and calmed down. He said that he did see one of his sisters here [presumably Manhattan, maybe Harlem], in some sort of program for heroin users, but hasn’t been able to find her: doesn’t know what program, doesn’t know where. He says he’s been here [again, where?] since 1974. I ask what will happen to him on Monday, and he says that there are hundreds of SROs in the city. I ask him if he will be assigned to one, and he confirms that he won’t know where. He hopes for Manhattan, “‘cause that’s my borough,” but he “could be sent to the moon.” Eventually he takes the hint that I want to move on, and lets me say things like, “I hope you get your housing and

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check on Monday,” and “I hope I see you again.” He asks for my card. I tell him instead that if he comes back to the neighborhood I’m often walking around. I ask him if he knows that little garden on 122nd and he brightens, says it’s real nice. I tell him I’m often there on Tuesdays and Thursdays. He seems excited. He thanks me for my compassion and I get embarrassed again. He takes my hand, and I tell him again that I hope he gets his housing. He asks for a hug, “even though I’m wet,” which I give him. When I leave I do not go down 123rd, thinking I’ve made a spectacle of myself. [what are the consequences of this? Will be interesting to see] I take the bus to my office.

At some point he had mentioned an organization or group having to do with AIDS, don’t know if he has it. He did mention being sick.

[I would be very interested in finding out the institutions he has to deal with, maybe NYCHA, welfare. This was a funny encounter. I usually refuse to stop to talk to men on the street, most of whom make noises of being sexually interested. Then, I kept interrupting him with questions and comments, which is not really my style but had to do with my discomfort at being so visible. He of course yielded to my interruptions but seemed grateful when I would check myself and allow him to talk—possibly a commentary on how institutional people treat him? He most certainly has had an education on and off the streets, and seems relatively harmless.

That I see him as harmless makes me face the question of safety. Eckson didn’t think I should be walking the streets of Harlem alone. I told myself that these were stereotypes about a dangerous inner city that no longer hold, that I’d be fine in the daytime. An acquaintance of mine who lives in Lenox Terrace refuses to take the subway there late at night; once she got off the subway late at night with me at 116th and took a cab home. I’m still apprehensive about being where I’m not wanted, and refuse to simply wander without somewhere to go. Especially after talking with Veronica, I see that our encounter is not one I’ve allowed myself—one unmediated by an institution, without layers of “protection,” but against what? Unpredictability, physical or emotional danger. Someone yelling at me. Making me face the kinds of feelings like the woman who resented me walking by without acknowledging her, my presence in the neighborhood, what I represent—I don’t know, and going to more institutions, as Veronica has suggested, may not be the most efficient way of finding out. Most certainly it points to a certain sense of safety in going through the institutions, but as in Baby College, my access is restricted according to the needs and insecurities of the institution. The conclusion for now? Keep on keeping on.]

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LINDA – Fieldnotes – Sunday, October 28, 2007

Subject: Halloween party in Wilson Garden

Location: 122nd st between Douglass and Powell

Time: 4:00-5:30pm

The party started at 3:30, but I didn't arrive until 4pm. By the time I arrived there were at least 20 children there. The front gate of the garden was decorated with pumpkins and a banner (skulls?). I later took a picture of some of the decorations, after Haja had taken some down.

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The street was much emptier today than yesterday.

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As I walked in a mom was on her way out, followed reluctantly by 2 children, about 5 and 10 years old. I passed below a plastic skull hanging from the structure in the front of the garden, and a banner. To the right on the east side of the garden a small table was set up as the face-painting station. Two young women, one white and one café-au-lait, were working on a few children there. Cindy hung out of the shed. Haja stood by the fire pit on the west side of the garden, where a young white man was tending a fire and helping children roast marshmallows. Another white woman, probably in her 30s, was helping children with a "pit the head on the witch" game. She was wearing a gold-colored cardboard crown. The green table was set up with Xeroxes of Halloween-themed activities, such as connect-the-dots and mazes with pumpkins, cats, and so on.

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Almost all of the parents and children were black, some with West Indian accents, except for one man with two white boys, and later, a white woman and her son. The children ranged in age from babies to teenagers, most in the 6-10 age range. One young lady, who appeared in her teens, sullenly asked a young girl who looked about five if she was ready to go. She little girl whined, "Noooooo!" [There clearly was a right answer, and that was not it.] The children appeared to be having a good time, wandering around from station to station, eating gooey marshmallows and candy. Most of the adults appeared bored, waiting for the time when they could leave. When I arrived very few were speaking with one another. Many of the adults wore jeans and sweatshirts, or other casual wear. One adorable toddler wore Minnie Mouse ears, a red skirt, and yellow pumps with bows. Another toddler wore a rooster costume, with a red comb.

There was a run on the shed when Cindy began handing out bags of candy. The bags were plastic party bags, printed with Halloween designs, orange and black and green and purple. [I didn't get a close look at the bags.] A girl standing next to me pulled out a school kit from her bag, which had pink and purple glittery pencils, and what I think was a small notebook. She seemed pleased. I asked her what else was in the bag, and she showed me lots of candy. She pulled out some M&M's and answered to my question that Kit-Kats were her favorite. The older child (around 13), perhaps her sister, got her attention. I moved to another group of children, three who also seemed to be siblings. The youngest, about 3 or 4, opened her bag to show me a book. The middle child, maybe 5, showed me his tiger face painting and growled, crouching on the ground like a tiger. The