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LINDA – Fieldnotes – Friday, November 16, 2007

Subject: Hanging out at the Lehman Brothers Health Promotion Lab

Location: 5<sup>th</sup> floor on HCZ building.

Time: 4:37-5:40pm

I arrived a little late at the Health Promotion Lab. I signed in on the ground floor, and checked in with the 5<sup>th</sup> floor secretary. She told me to “go right in” through the glass doors. [This time she did not call Sarah.]

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Inside I met a young girl and asked if Sarah was around. The girl, whose name I later found out was Kimberly, was very petite and slim. She looked like a student to me, that is, a middle-school student. She was about 4’10” and maybe 80 pounds, had a developed chest but no hips. She wore jeans and a hot-pink t-shirt under a black hoodie. Her straightened hair was pulled back in a ponytail falling to her shoulders. She had dark chocolate skin. She led me to the bathroom as Sarah came out. Sarah was working with Nikki to lift fingerprints from the bathroom mirror with tape. She worried aloud that the fingerprints were not showing. I asked if they used pencil lead or some kind of powder and Sarah explained that they had powder from a kit. Sarah declared, “Packing tape! I bet packing tape would work really well!”

We moved towards the conference room, and Sarah introduced me to Nikki and Kimberly. She told me I could interview Nikki in the conference room. I told her I didn’t need to interview, not yet, I just wanted to see what the Explainers do. Sarah said they were cleaning up. She told me a group of kids were coming up in about 20 minutes, if I could wait. I said, perfect. [Nikki also seemed relieved.] Sarah explained, somewhat apologetically, that today was “Fun Day” so there was no formal curriculum. I said that’s fine, and she told me to come back the last Friday of the month. I told her I had a conference that week but I’d try to come back another time.

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Nikki had a white card with purple fingerprints on it. I asked if those were her fingerprints and she said yeah. I asked if she had ink on her fingers still and she held them up for inspection, saying the ink hadn’t washed out yet. I asked if they had had a group doing fingerprints, and Nikki explained that they were testing out the kit to see if it works.

Nikki doesn’t look much older than Kimberly. I can’t remember what she wore. She also has straightened hair in a ponytail, with milk chocolate skin. I think she’s about 5’6” and maybe 110 lbs. Both girls were not talkative around me initially. Sarah stood in the door and helped get the conversation going, saying that they just showed a movie. I asked which one and she said Crash. I think my eyebrows went up and she said yeah, it was interesting. She said that the kids really wanted to show another movie [I can’t remember the name]. I said I hadn’t seen it and I asked Nikki about it, which launched her into an extended description of the convoluted plot involving immigrants in cages and plans to break out. Kim didn’t say anything, and kept cleaning up the kits. Sarah took a large box

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labeled "DNA" out of the room. When she came back Nikki was still talking and Sarah tried to clean up the other kit.

Sarah then decided that they would set out clay in the conference room. She pulled out some modeling clay, telling Kimberly (as Nikki talked with me) that this time they would limit the amount of clay the kids could use, because this stuff was expensive. She made reference to a girl who had mixed all the colors last time. She also said that they would build the heart model [a plasticine-like model, which you could take apart], and set it in the middle of the table. Sarah handed Kimberly a plastic bag of modeling clay and told her to divide it into 10 parts.

Kimberly began separating the large lump of clay into smaller lumps. Nikki finally noticed she was the only one not working, and began trying to stuff a component into the fingerprint kit, the same component that Sarah had given up on trying to fit into the small space. I asked the girls about the kids coming, and Kim told me they were from "this school." I clarified, Harlem Children's Zone? She confirmed. I asked, you guys don't go to this school. Kim gave a laugh and said no. I said it doesn't go up to high school. Nikki said 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I asked if they came after school, and Nikki said she didn't have classes on Friday. I said oh, you're in college. Kimberly gave another little laugh as Nikki explained all except Monica, she's a senior. Ohh, I said, I got it mixed up, I thought Monica was the only college student and the rest of you were high school students. We lapsed into an awkward silence.

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Sarah came back in and mused aloud what they would do with this clay, wondering if they could do viruses. She thought aloud, maybe a HIV virus for World AIDS Day, and then they could set the models out for display. Nikki asked if TRUCE was coming for World AIDS Day, and Sarah said, in the tone of voice that tries to head off disappointment, that they wouldn't come. A new guy came in, a light-skinned Latino, and everybody greeted him. (I just said hello.) I later found out his name was Balbino. Sarah talked about wanting to do a lesson on taboos, on world taboos, asking, remember? She walked out, asking, "is Dylan still in the lab?" Sarah came in and told Balbino, in the next 15 minutes, look up the structure of the HIV virus and find pictures. He said ok.

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Balbino walked out, Nikki took the packed-up kit out, and I picked up one of the clay balls that Kim was preparing. I exclaimed at the texture, having experience with sticky play-doh type clay. She smiled and said little. She handed me a chunk to form into a ball. She began setting a small ball of clay in front of each chair, and I did the same until a small ball of clay sat in front of each of the six chairs. She set the remainder into the middle of the table along with the heart model.

We went into the small office where Balbino was printing out images of the HIV virus from Google Images. Nikki was standing behind him, and another guy, who Sarah later told me was her assistant, sat at another computer. Nikki remarked on how pretty one of the images was, and I agreed. "Oh, what a pretty HIV virus," Sarah joked, and we laughed. I remarked that the virus looked pretty complicated, and Balbino said yeah. A few seconds later, I asked if all those pictures were all the HIV virus, and Balbino said

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yes. Nikki supplied, "Mutations." I picked up the two pictures that had been printed out and remarked, nice printer (color laser printer). Kimberly and Nikki looked at the pictures with me, and I put them back on top of the printer.

I then remarked on the white plastic tub sitting on top of a shelf, labeled "CONDOM JEWELRY." I said this in a laughing tone of voice and asked if I could look inside. Nikki pulled it down for me enthusiastically, and Sarah explained that it was a great hit. Condom necklaces, condom bracelets. Nikki handed me a bunch of condoms stapled together. The condoms looked like they were produced for the City of New York. Sarah jumped up and brought me more, opening a box to show me condom earrings, which were condoms dangling from a hook. Sarah said she wore a condom hair pin, which was a bobby pin with a condom hanging from it. [I was disappointed, I guess I expected something cute to put on top of the condom?] I handed the "bracelet" and "necklace" back to Nikki as Sarah explained that she emphasized to the kids NOT to use those particular condoms.

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At some point she planned aloud that they would have the clay, DDR (Dance Dance Revolution, an arcade/video game in which the players have to follow directions on the screen to step right, left, forward, backward, or two at a time in time to a song), and the computers as activities prepared for children who stopped by.

Around 4:07 two girls in uniform show up. One of them asks for a bandaid. Sarah says that she has one or can get one in a can-do voice. Tall girl says something to Sarah about pulling down her shirt. Sarah says it's supposed to look like that. She's wearing tight stretch blue jeans and a white blouse under a black ruched vest printed with words in white cursive.

The tall one declared her enthusiastic desire to play Dance Dance Revolution. Sarah, Nikki, Kim, and Balbino went with her to set it up. It consisted of two game pads, large, flat plastic-cover pads about 2.5 to 3 feet square, and a PlayStation video game console, in front of the visual-interactive installation. I hung back and took notes. As they do this the two girls look at the spine of books in the bookcases. Short Girl remarks that they need to get some more books.

I pick up a comic laying on an end table (a tall cushion at thigh height with a tapered shape), and examine the cover. Sarah tells me how great those are. She had 10 of them, and most of them have disappeared, which is good. Usually they don't encourage the theft of their materials, but this comic book is about HIV/AIDS. I promise to read it.

Meanwhile DDR has been set up and the tall girl pressures the shorter girl to try it. They are both wearing white polo short-sleeve t-shirts and black ballet flats. The tall girl is wearing navy pants, and the short girl is wearing a navy skirt. I think the short girl carries a gray sweatshirt. Short Girl protests that she doesn't know how to play. Tall Girl says it was her first time playing last time. Nikki starts teaching them how to play. She looks for a slow song.

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For quite awhile Nikki works to teach the girls how to play the game. Tall Girl is passable, but Short Girl is really struggling. As they play I stand with Sarah and chat her up. I remark that it must be harder to play on the soft pads vs. the hard surface on the arcade game. Sarah says the kids said the same thing, but the pads are so much cheaper. The hard surface costs \$100, and this game system is her own. She asked her parents to buy the new pads since hers was wearing out. All the pounding, of course they're going to break. Sarah tells the kids to step lightly, it's better. I say something about staying in the middle circle, which prompts her to instruct me, actually you don't go back to the middle circle. You have to when you're learning the game so you know where you're at. [When I watched teenagers play this game, it's true that they usually stand in the last position, which will be useful with faster songs.]

We chat some more. I remark on the texture of the clay, and she said she learned that from the Children's Museum. She says she likes it because you can mix it like paint. She also asks me about the Community Arts meeting. I say I went for a little bit. She asks if I saw the kids. [TRUCE? I don't ask] I say no, I missed the morning. She said her Fridays are crazy. [I miss another opportunity to ask.] We keep chatting until at a pause, I finally tell her not to let me keep her. She reassures me, oh no. A visitor comes in with a binder, I think to sign in the girls. The visitor, a dark-skinned black woman with straightened hair and wearing casual clothing, knows the girls by name.

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Short Girl gives up on the game soon, even with Nikki dancing beside her. Tall girl plays again with Nikki. I stand around with Sarah's assistant [can't remember his name] and chat. He says usually there's about 20 kids running around. He tells me usually the program manager wants them out of the space during the day, only to have kids in the space after school because it's too noisy. I ask if they work in the back, where the clinic is, and he says no, waving at the computers at the "front desk" in the middle of the space. Oh, I reply, I could see where it gets noisy.

Assistant challenges Balbino to DDR. Balbino barely beats him. They look around to get either me or Kim to play. I play next, and after watching everyone I have a pretty good idea of how to play the game. I beat Balbino. Assistant says I beat Balbino for him. [Leave it up to the guys to make it competitive.] Then Kim gets up to play. She doesn't do well, and she insists that the pad on the left is broken. Assistant plays again and also says the pad on the left is broken. [I played on the pad on the right.]

Amid all this stomping, I read the comic. It tells the story of a teenager whose life is changed when her single dad contracts HIV/AIDS. At the same time her boyfriend is pressuring her for sex. In the middle of the comic there are a bunch of informative pages that give facts about HIV, a quiz, and a word search. I remark to Assistant, so that's how they sneak it in there. The artwork is beautiful, at the level of a "real" comic rather than educational cartoon.

Tall girl has to leave and everyone says goodbye.

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Eventually people lose interest in the game—it's only Explainers playing. Short girl is looking at one of the comics, and Nikki also picks one up. Kimberly gets up and leaves. I chat briefly with Assistant, who is an AmeriCorps member. I ask him if it's a one or two year program, and he says one. I tell him I had a friend who administered AmeriCorps programs for a couple of different nonprofits. I ask him it works, did he apply to AmeriCorps first, or to the organization first? He said that you apply to AmeriCorps first, and then you interview with maybe 6 or 7 organizations, and out of the ones that like you, you get to pick.

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A young lady comes in and Assistant greets her. She sits at one of the front desk computers. He asks her if she had class today. She says no. He asks how her day is going. She says good and asks him how his day is going. He says good. She calls to him that she has something to tell him as she looks at the computer.

Assistant notes the comic in my lap and tells me "that's good literature." I compliment the artwork and story line. I return to the comic, and he goes to talk with New Girl [whom I don't meet]. In the second half the story follows the girl in her relationship with her boyfriend, who is pressuring her for sex. She tells him she's not ready, and he agrees. He asks her to his house so he can tell her he's sorry in person (or something like that). At his house he tells her he loves her. She says she loves him too and muses that maybe they can have sex after all. She asks him if he has a condom and he says they don't need it. They get into a fight and she stomps off. I find this a very realistic story line, except that the girl left rather than give in. It turns out the comic is based on a story written by a 17 year old who won a contest.

Balbino wanders back in to the front room and I ask him for water. He shows me the water fountain and I say I'll drink out of that, but he leads me past the warren of clinic offices to open a door with a keypad. There is a bathroom in there, and a small kitchen with a Sparkletts-type water dispenser. He tells me if I drank from the fountain I wouldn't have a cup. I thank him. As we walk back I ask him if it matters that the other kids didn't show up and this gets him talking about the stuff they do on the computers.

I ask him if he can show me, if he's not doing anything, and he responds enthusiastically. He tells me I have to see an asthma game. First he shows me a bunch of web-based computer games, on food and nutrition, etc.

Some urls:

<http://nutritionexplorations.org/kids/main.asp>

[www.aboutkidshealth.org](http://www.aboutkidshealth.org)

[www.teen.com](http://www.teen.com)

I ask if the Explorers find these sites, and he says yes, and people send them to them Or the kids say, I was playing this at home.

He says they can't "cancel a page" because there are some words, like HIV

I ask what this is, is this filtering?

He confirms, says it is sensitive material

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I remark all these skills they are learning  
He agrees, says working with kids  
I say curriculum planning too  
He expands, and figuring out what's age-appropriate  
I say computers, but he probably already learned it before working here  
He says yes

I ask if they all planned the curriculum together  
And he says he just started (with the organization) a few months ago  
There's a Bible (of materials and lesson plans), and everyone adds to it  
[His enthusiasm is catching, and I become gushy as well]

He shows me the asthma game, where the player is given a tour of the respiratory system  
with a guy hanging off a nose hair then the uvula, lecurring  
I remark on the Explorer's mastery of material, that everybody is giving me the same  
information

He talks about what a great job it is  
first day: play a game for an hour  
I say Sarah seems great, and he agrees  
He tells me a story that prompts from me the response that the kids really seem to be  
learning something and having fun  
He praises the software and other equipment  
I credit the Explainers, and say something gushy about how they all seem to get along

Tells me about the guy who did SuperSize Me  
They showed it in the lab  
He talked about the guy's TV show  
Going into a poor community for 30 days working for minimum wage  
Getting the kind of apartment you can get on that salary  
Also a show on being gay  
Found a guy from the South who said that he hated homosexuals  
Took him to San Francisco, got him living with a gay man who broke a lot of the  
homophobic man's stereotypes, like gay men wear dresses  
I say it's like reality TV  
He wonders if the people on survivor, how can they say they're all alone with the camera  
man there  
We talk about how the camerapeople must have food, tents, other comforts  
This gets him going about the Real World, where everyone is hot (good-looking), live in  
a giant mansion, and all they have to do is go clubbing  
He says he would do that too  
I haven't seen it so I don't have a lot to say

He is a pre-med major at Columbia  
Originally from Spain, went to France, Paris, to boarding school

I ask him if he wants to stay in the US and he says he misses home  
The politics in the US are not for him  
I say and if you're in NY, then...

[Leave it to me to bond first with the Columbia student who appears gay... do the other Explainers think he is strange? Do they get along? I hope that if I come back often enough I can also make friends with Nikki and Kim. Potential problems not reflected in my gushy tone: that they don't have kids today and what that might mean, the insecurity of the project, possible tensions between people working there, etc. Perhaps because I perceive them as kids I am more patronizing and make assumptions faster than with the Kitchen Table adults.]

Sarah comes over and asks if he has shown me something, the name of which I don't catch. He says yes. She asks about another program and he says no. She opens it, when I see the Learning Lab logo I ask if it is their game. Sarah says yes [but I don't know if they made it or they bought it.] I peek at the computer clock (Balbino's computer doesn't show the time) and express fake-surprise at how late it is, 5:37. I say thanks and goodbye, pausing by the small office to say goodbye to Nikki and Kim. Assistant has gone already. Sarah invites me to come by again, to send her an email first.

On the way home I caught a Bx15. It was quite crowded, and the people who got on with me all had to stand by the front door. An elderly lady remarked, "Gets worse all the time." Meanwhile a middle-aged lady was loudly denouncing a young man [not sure if he was still on the bus] for not giving up his seat in the front of the bus. She shouted, "He's only nineteen! He's not disabled!" The bus driver commented on the loud lady, something like "That's some roughed-up pussy" (perhaps I misheard that). The elderly lady mm-hmmed and replied, "Yeah you right."

Two stops later the loud lady said she was getting off, telling the bus driver to make sure to stop to let her off. The bus driver, to murmurs of appreciation, emphasized that he would. He asked her, while driving, "You need a transfer, lady?"