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# Profiles in Progress: Client Stories

## Herbert and Barbara Levit

**H**erb Levit finished high school at the age of 16 and enrolled at Temple University. Certainly he felt he was on a fast track.

But he enlisted in the Navy at age 17 to serve out the last year of World War II. Herb graciously points out that was the year that Barbara was completing fourth grade.

Interestingly, Herb's father was a physician, and Herb was selected as a Navy corpsman. His training was given at the Bainbridge Naval Training Center in Philadelphia, a thriving complex in those days and, after two years of naval service, Herb returned to Temple to obtain his B.S. and M.Ed degrees in Psychology. He was recruited by the North Dakota Department of Mental Health to work in that state, providing services to developmentally challenged individuals. With that solid, practical experience, Herb returned once again to Temple University where he earned his E.Ed in Clinical Psychology.

It was at this time in the early 1950s that the state of Pennsylvania began building a modern mental health services system. Until that time, the caliber of care in Pennsylvania and most other jurisdictions was characterized as "warehouses for pacifying treatment." The antiquated methods at that time, sometimes described as barbaric with modern hindsight, were re-evaluated with lessons learned through the prism of World War II experiences with mental trauma. The methods in vogue then were publicized with the movie expose "Snake Pit." Lobotomies for behavior control were common.

Herb Levit began his practice at Dixmont State Hospital in 1954 at the vanguard of the mental health care revolution. He became recognized for his

creation and implementation of modern programs of care. He had met a young nurse, Barbara, prior to his last departure from Philadelphia who would become his wife after his move to Pittsburgh in November of 1954. They had their first child Debbie in November of 1955 and their son David also now a practicing psychologist, in 1959.

An interesting, Pittsburgh historical footnote has Barbara administering Salk Polio vaccine to local students when it was first made available.

Herb transferred to Woodville State Hospital in 1966 and also began a collateral private patient practice. In 1971, Herb set up the mental health unit at Allegheny General Hospital, continued his private patient practice and also set up a teaching program for graduate psychology students at Duquesne University at Dixmont and Woodville hospitals as internship locations. The students became paid staff of the hospitals, thus making them much better prepared for their field upon graduation. Father David Smith, a PhD, psychologist and professor at Duquesne University, subsequently wrote a history of psychology where he singled out Herb Levit as a pioneer in the field for his innovative therapy and teaching programs.

Herb continues his private patient practice in clinical and forensic psychology today and has provided expert witness evaluations and testimony in many high profile criminal cases over the



decades. He pioneered the battered woman syndrome defense that has been heralded by many victims groups. That case was successful and was described in the PA Law Journal as the first of its kind. That defense has become commonly accepted today as a result.

Herb and Barbara, along with their grown children, Debbie and husband Mark as well as David and wife Susan, and their grandchildren, Jonathon, Hilary and Jake, enjoy travel connected to their avocation of bird watching. Those travels have taken them to Europe, Central and South America, many oceanic islands, Japan, Australia, Fiji, Greenland as well as most of the United States. They also participated in a medical exchange program with China.

Herb and Barbara give thanks for their fantastic relationship of over 51 years, and were very gracious in expressing their gratitude to The Fragasso Group for the financial guidance that permits them to relax and enjoy their lives. The Fragasso Group thanks them for their 25 years of confidence in us and for the privilege of serving.