Reflections on Prevention at the Macro-Level: 
An Interview with George Albee<sup>1,2</sup>

Jack Pransky

George Albee enjoys a wide reputation as a founder of the prevention movement in the field of Psychopathology, having devoted his professional career to the prevention of mental and emotional disabilities. Dr. Albee has served as President of the American Psychological Association and Director of the President's Commission on Mental Health Task Force on Prevention. His early prevention "formula" has been the prototype for many explanations of prevention that have followed. He is Professor of Psychology at the University of Vermont, where I interviewed him in April, 1989 (with a follow-up in 1990).

KEY WORDS: Albee; mental health; prevention, history of.

JP: You've been around prevention longer than most of us, so you probably have the best perspective on comparing where things are now with the way they were back then. Can you take us back 10 or 20 years?

GA: Well, let me start 30 years ago. A major benchmark in this whole field was something called the Joint Commission on Mental Illness and Health, during the Eisenhower administration. It was a major effort to examine the nation's needs and resources in the field of Mental Health. It met for a two year period, and I was Director of the Task Force on Manpower, a term we wouldn't use anymore. The final report of that Joint Commission was in a book entitled, Action For Mental Health. It was really an attempt to find a way to give the states an out to not build new mental


<sup>2</sup>Address correspondence to Jack Pransky, Co-Director, PREVENTION UNLIMITED, RD Box 134, Cabot, VT 05647.
hospitals. You see, in the middle '50's, the state hospitals were absolutely bulging at the seams. So the plan was to do something to keep people from going into the state hospitals, and to discharge as many people as possible into the community. So the Joint Commission proposed building 2000 community mental health centers across the country.

One of the requirements for a community mental health center, according to this plan, was community consultation and—they didn't use the word "prevention," but—keeping people from becoming casualties. So in a way, "prevention" had it's official birth at that time.

Jack Kennedy read the book and, almost immediately, then became President, and he sent the first message to Congress ever by an American President proposing that Federal money be spent in the area of community care. One of the critical elements in Kennedy's message in 1963, was that treatment in the community be available but that also prevention programs be set up. Now, the Congress was relatively conservative, and—without going into a lot of detail—it decided to build Community Mental Health Centers—bricks and mortar—but give no money to staff them, because that was "socialized medicine," and we all know that's like Godless Communism. So the Community Mental Health Center movement began with a handicap that there was no money to staff these places.

Later, when Lyndon Johnson became President and he had a little more clout with Congress, some money was made available to staff them, and there were "community consultation" elements in the community mental health centers. These have since disappeared because they don't generate any income. Today, the only things that go on in community mental health centers are programs that can generate income, because under the Republican administrations the funding for community mental health centers has been very slim.

Jumping ahead, I did the book on "manpower" and became convinced that we would never have enough professional people to treat all the people with problems, and I learned something about the field of public health, which says, "No mass disorder afflicting humankind has ever been eliminated by attempts at treating the affected individual . . . ," so my conversion to prevention occurred during the late 50's and early 60's.

When finally Jimmy Carter was elected in the mid '70s, he appointed a new Commission on Mental Health, and he appointed his wife Rosalynn an Honorary Chair of that Commission. The other important person on that Commission was Beverly Long, who was President of the National Mental Health Association, and a long time friend of Rosalynn Carter. I was made Chair of the Task Panel on Prevention, and there were a num-