

PBS' "TO THE CONTRARY"

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MS. ERBE: Coming up on To The Contrary, an historic first for women as the Democrats choose Californian Nancy Pelosi to lead their party in the U.S. House. We deliver a one-on-one interview with the first woman to lead either party in Congress on her plans for luring back women voters.

Then, childcare for the nation's most vulnerable, the homeless and the unemployed.

Last, a new study says it's no big deal for menopausal women to become pregnant and bear children.

(Musical break.)

MS. ERBE: Hello, I'm Bonnie Erbe. Welcome to an on the road edition of To The Contrary, a discussion of news and social trends from a variety of women's perspectives.

We want your feedback on our new look. More on that later.

In the news this week, two firsts in Congress as women are promoted to higher posts than ever before in both parties in the U.S. House. California Democrat Nancy Pelosi is the newly elected Minority Leader in the U.S. House. Debra Price becomes GOP Conference Chair, the highest ranking Congress achieved by a Republican woman. In October of last year, Representative Pelosi became the highest ranking woman in the history of the House, rising to Democratic Whip. Pelosi is an outspoken supporter of women's rights, international family planning, AIDS prevention, human rights in China, and environmental causes. Here ascension comes as Democrats are trying to choose a new direction for the party, and turn around losses in this month's mid-term elections.

Welcome Minority Leader Elect, thank you for joining us, and congratulations.

REPRESENTATIVE PELOSI: Good morning, Bonnie. Thank you very much. My pleasure to be here.

MS. ERBE: How do women figure in the women's vote and issues that affect women, children, families as you take the Democrats in a new direction?

REPRESENTATIVE PELOSI: Well, first, let me say that it's not about taking the Democrats in a new direction. It's about Democrats having more clarity of message, and coming together to formulate a proposal for economic growth which will create jobs and get economic opportunity for many more people, and the success of our economy when we become successful. And hopefully that will be soon. So, it's not about a new direction, it's just about what we believe in, have believed in all along about economic opportunity for all Americans.

MS. ERBE: Okay. And how do you do that? There was talk in this past mid-term election about women and minorities staying home, just not being energized to get to the polls. In the last presidential election, when we had exit polls, we didn't this time, we saw that white married women started to vote more Republican than they had in the past, and single women, lower income women, minority women stayed with the Democrats. How do you get both those sections together and build the base you need to become victorious again?

REPRESENTATIVE PELOSI: It is my belief, and I think the belief of many Democrats that women are essential to our success, they always have been, whether it's by voting, by running for office, or by just helping other candidates in the Democratic Party. And, you're right, there is some kind of -- there is a breakdown among women in different economic groups. But all women care about our children. I always say the three most important issues facing the Congress, our children, our children, our children. Their health, their education, the economic security of their family, the environment in which they live, the world at peace in which they will flourish. Women do across the board, as do men, but women especially. As the mother of five children, and the grandmother of five children, I certainly can identify with the aspirations of young women and mature women as they have concerns about their family.

But women are interested in issues beyond what might be considered traditional women's issues. A woman's right to choose, again, children's issues. Women are interested in the economy. Women are interested in national security. I think they have to hear a stronger, clearer message from the Democrats on those scores, because there is a sentiment out there that I have confronted on the campaign trail that, oh, the Republicans really are not about turning back Roe v. Wade, or opposing a woman's right to choose, it simply isn't true. The fact is that all of that is very much in danger.

But, again, it's hard --

MS. ERBE: So that essentially will be your focus in the coming weeks?

REPRESENTATIVE PELOSI: No. No, our focus will be the economy, but many of these upper income educated women are very committed to a woman's right to choose. Our party does not have a position on it, it's a matter of conscience. But many of these women do support choice. The Republican Party does not. We have to make that clear to women as to what is at stake in a Republican majority in the House and in the Senate, and indeed in the White House as well.

MS. ERBE: Okay. Thank you, Congresswoman on this issue. We want to get on to another issue affecting children very directly. Behind the headlines, the debate over childcare and early childhood education cuts across all socioeconomic and racial lines, but nowhere is it more poignant than in communities where there are a disproportionate number of homeless families, and families living in poverty.

To The Contrary traveled to San Francisco to profile a childcare center in one of the poorest neighborhoods that is a model for the nation. San Francisco's Tenderloin District, homelessness, unemployment and poverty are the norm. Single room occupancy hotels, and homeless shelters line the streets. But one building stands out as an oasis of hope, the Tenderloin Childcare Center, also known as TLC.

MS. CASEY-LERMA: A lot of times the children are moving, like every couple of days, they're not even sure when they're moving or when they might have to move, who they have to leave behind. Whereas, here they have that consistency. They come every day, they see the same teachers, they see the same other families. By providing that consistency, we're able to foster real positive self-esteem, how to connect with other people, how to solve problems. The more we can support children, the more they're able to learn.

MS. ERBE: One quarter of the children at TLC are homeless, either living in shelters or other temporary situations. Many have special problems, language barriers, developmental issues. Others are victims of child abuse or neglect, or unattended health problems. Almost all are immigrants, more than half do not speak English. Lameia Assaywe (sp), doctor in her homeland of Nigeria, hopes to resume her career in the U.S. First, she needs to learn English and take additional course work and tests so she can practice medicine here. As she goes through this process, she feels lucky to have her two daughters at TLC.

MS. ASSAYWE: My kids can play. Here my kids learn English, they can make friends too, here. They can have get lots of ideas.

MS. ERBE: Maria Torre's children are TLC graduates. Today, they're thriving at the Tenderloin Community School.

MS. TORRE: Rayne and Francis really fared better in school because of that.

In fact, they compare the kids who didn't go to preschool and the kids who went to preschool, and they're just so ready when they were in kindergarten.

MS. ERBE: Kindergarten readiness is also one of TLC's goals.

MR. DOBSON: A lot of that right now is about social and emotional development. It's learning to -- it's not so much about knowing how to read or write, it's being prepared for that next level. We do prereading skills, we do prewriting skills. But it's about the interactions between the children, working in groups, working with others, being used to routines, being used to working with teachers.

MS. ERBE: And this preparation for school is incredibly important.

SECRETARY PAIGE: When children come to school with a foundation especially in literacy, some foundation in words, hearing words, a vocabulary, a culture where they can sit down and take instructions, those kids tend to do well, and that gap between those kids and the other ones is so wide that it makes it difficult for the teacher to teach.

MS. ERBE: Children in high quality care possess stronger language, math and conceptualization skills. They also exhibit fewer behavioral problems. They're more likely to graduate from high school, less likely to commit crimes. All this boosts government income and cuts costs. Despite this, the Center for Children and Poverty reports the parents of six million youngsters nationwide who work full or part-time need childcare, but can't afford it. An Illinois study found the childcare shortage keeps 42 percent of welfare parents from working full-time; 39 percent of them from looking for work. Parents waiting for childcare face serious financial difficulties, and have trouble keeping jobs. They may even be forced on to welfare.

Maria Torre, now a parent advocate, was an environmental activist in the Philippines. She experienced this problem first-hand when she moved to the U.S.

MS. TORRE: You cannot stay at home, take care of the kids, and live on nothing. So, many parents like me, who have young children, have to get on welfare just to survive. And it's a stop gap measure, and I knew that. But there was no childcare. I needed childcare to go to work. I could not leave my kids home by themselves. So, I got on waiting lists.

MS. ERBE: In fact, 200,000 families in California on waiting lists for childcare assistance. In San Francisco, some 6,000 preschoolers are waiting for subsidized care at any given time. The Tenderloin Center recently moved from the ballroom of a residential hotel into a new building. It's doubling the number of spaces, but that's still not enough.

MR. DOBSON: And that's so hard, having to say no to families, and understanding families' frustration about wanting, needing childcare, and being on waiting lists, and not having the spaces to be able to offer them, but having to refer them to other centers, other schools, to go on their waiting lists also.

REPRESENTATIVE GEORGE MILLER: The society says all of the right words. The politicians say all the right words. The Congress, the state legislators, the president, they all say the right words, but when it comes time to really put the money forward to deal with the children who are the most vulnerable, who are living at the edges of society, the centers aren't where they live, the centers aren't where their parents work, it's difficult because they need public transportation, and we set up all of these barriers to these children having a shot at it.

MS. ERBE: TLC helps children and families get that shot. As a model center, it provides more than just childcare and early childhood education.

MR. DOBSON: We have an onsite social service coordinator who works with families, like a family advocate, and so that's a member of our staff who the parents can go to any time to get help with housing, with school, with work-related, with assessments for the children. We also provide other consultation onsite as far as physical therapy, or mental health consultation.

MS. ERBE: What makes this a model program? Health and social services, low child to adult ratios, low staff turnover, consistent, sensitive, well-trained and well-compensated caregivers. At TLC, the pay is not high, but it's higher than average, and it comes with full benefits and health insurance, a rarity. In fact, low pay and no benefits forces one-third of the nation's childcare workers to leave their jobs each year.

REPRESENTATIVE MILLER: We have people who go to school, they get a good education on child development, they come into the profession and they realize there's nowhere to go, there's no future. And they leave. If we could just keep those people in the field. We need a massive upgrade of this entire system.

MS. ERBE: Congressman Miller says, that upgrade can't be accomplished on the cheap, but it more than pays off.

MS. CASEY-LERMA: We have quite a few success stories of parents that have been able to secure their basic needs, whether it's housing, or jobs, or school, and then they're able to, I think, really look at and begin to have some bigger hopes and dreams for their children.

MR. : Next door is the Hospitality House, which is where a lot of people who are down and out go to get help. So I hope that if their children stay here, when they leave they may never end up going there.

MS. ERBE: Cheryl Polk, child psychologist, welcome to the panel. Why are programs like this important?

MS. POLK: Well, Bonnie, the research over the past decade is compelling. We know that children who have the benefit of a good preschool education are active, eager learners. They have later academic success, and later employment success. We know that they're less likely to become dependent on government subsidies. The problem is that not enough children have the benefit of a good quality preschool education.

MS. ERBE: And, Congresswoman, if I may bring you in at this point, what does it look like in the future for funding, for federal funding, for programs like this? Is it likely or unlikely? Congresswoman Pelosi, why don't you go first?

REPRESENTATIVE PELOSI: Well, I would defer to Congresswoman Solis, because she is on the committee of authorization, where they tried to put \$11 billion into the authorization bill, but that was turned back by the Republican majority in the Congress, as well as a quality set-aside improving the quality of childcare in our country. I am on the Appropriations Committee that funds childcare in our country, and it is almost a tragedy that we have ignored the importance of childcare. It is the missing link. It is, we have welfare reform which insists that in a period of time women have to go to work, and that's important to have work as the goal, but when women have small children at home that need to be cared

for, or brought to a childcare center, we have to have quality and quantity of opportunity for them to do that.

MS. ERBE: Okay, let me bring in one of our --

REPRESENTATIVE PELOSI: How do you expect women to succeed?

MS. ERBE: Let me bring one of our Republican commentators in here. Karen Czarnecki, what about turning back that \$11 billion in childcare?

MS. CZARNECKI: I think this is a very difficult issue. And, quite frankly, it's not a matter of whether to provide adequate childcare, but it's a matter of how to go about it. There are some in Congress who believe that it should be a universal healthcare, which is provided to everyone, and the costs of that are absolutely prohibitive. And, quite frankly, we're a democrat society that believes in Federalism. The state should figure out how they want to provide a lot of these things. It shouldn't be the federal government as a top down approach telling everyone how to do it. I mean --

MS. ERBE: Congresswoman Solis, your response?

REPRESENTATIVE SOLIS: Well, I think the federal government does have a responsibility. I know in our own State of California, we have over 230,000 children that are waiting right now on waiting lists to get childcare. And we know that their developmental years between birth and three, I mean, this is a primary time when we need to really be able to provide the best service. Universal preschool service for these children, and especially for low income and minority. Latino children in California make up a large number of those children that really need this type of quality child developmental.

MS. ERBE: Tara Setmayer, is the argument here essentially in the division along party lines, isn't one party saying, you need to take care of yourselves, and another party is saying, society needs to take care of you?

MS. SETMAYER: No. I think that we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that everyone recognizes the importance of childcare, the importance of self-sufficiency for low income or minority single parents. Republicans, especially President Bush, this administration has been very childcare friendly in that they have proposed billions of dollars in the welfare reform bills for childcare programs. What we're concerned about on the Republican side is the quality of care. Do we want federally run childcare centers, or do we want successful programs, do we want the states to recognize what needs are in their respective areas, and then provide programs and the money necessary to implement quality childcare.

MS. ERBE: Cheryl Polk, is the issue that you see from being a child psychologist in California, is that the issue, are those the needs that are out there, or what's your perspective on this?

MS. POLK: I actually think that, and this is the issue. I think what we don't understand is quality childcare is the first step in the education system, and the president's education goals will not -- he will not be able to achieve those goals without quality childcare. And education is, I think, a federal responsibility, and childcare is the first step in the educational system and, therefore, should also be a federal responsibility adequately funded.

MS. CZARNECKI: Education is only 5 percent of the federal tax dollars. Most

of education is funded at the state and local level. And that's something that we should not miss in this entire discussion.

MS. ERBE: Congresswoman Pelosi?

REPRESENTATIVE PELOSI: I would just like to say that earlier in this year, the president with great fanfare signed the Leave No Child Behind Bill, and then just a few short months later he sent over to our Committee on Appropriations which funds education a request that was \$7.2 billion short of his own bill, of his own fanfare signing of bill, \$7.2 billion short, leaving millions of children behind. The same is true in the childcare, we shouldn't even be having -- this should be politics aside. This is about our little children, and we should -- of course the state has a role, and of course the federal government has a role as far as quality and opportunity for childcare. It's impossible for single moms or even low income people, really it goes across economic lines. It's very difficult to get quality childcare. But what we have to remember is that investment in childcare saves the taxpayers money. We should be doing it because it is the moral, right thing to do, to take care of our children. But if we invest in their well-being early enough, as has been said, they will learn better as they get into school, they will have fewer problems and challenges educationally, they will find it easier to be productive members of our society, and it's the least we can do for our children who are our greatest resources, President Kennedy said, and our greatest hope for the future.

MS. ERBE: Now do you agree that it saves money? Are there data out there that show that early childhood education saves money, or is it something that people, Republicans who are generally for lower taxes, just don't want to pay for?

MS. CZARNECKI: No, I don't think it's really either one of those. I mean, there are some data out there saying Headstart programs are helping children in low income communities, and those should be improved or expanded. I don't think anybody would really disagree with that. It's how --

MS. SETMAYER: The administration has done that.

MS. CZARNECKI: The administration has done that, but it's never enough for the other side who wants to say that all three-year-olds should be in preschool. Well, parents have to have choices and decisions, and a lot of low income families want their other family members taking care of their kids. As much as Headstart might be available to them, and we're a country that believes that people should have options and choices.

I do think that getting children in early education programs is a good thing, but I don't think -- it's never going to be enough how much you can pay for a lot of these things.

MS. ERBE: How much of an unmet need is there, Cheryl Polk, in San Francisco, for example?

MS. POLK: In San Francisco, San Francisco mirrors kind of the national norm, about 11.2 children who -- that's the wrong statistic, 50 percent of women who are working need childcare that can't find childcare. Available slots, there's six children who need childcare for every one child that receives it in San Francisco, and that is not unusual.

I also wanted to respond to your point, the Rand Corporation, a major research corporation, did a meta-analysis of all childcare programs over the last 30 years

in this country. They are clear that for every dollar invested in childcare, the government saves \$7. There is no doubt about that, the research is totally overwhelming and compelling across all programs.

MS. ERBE: Thank you very much, Cheryl Polk, and Congresswoman Pelosi, for joining us for this segment.

Some shocking, thought provoking, and controversial news out about motherhood this week. Thanks to advances in reproductive technology, a major study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association reports, there's no medical reason why healthy women in their 50s should be prevented from bearing babies conceived with donated eggs. This comes from the largest study ever of motherhood after menopause. Among 77 women who participated in the University of Southern California's Assisted Reproduction Program over a 10-year period, there were no infant or mother deaths, and no serious health problems for the babies. A study did find older mothers are likely to have Cesarean birth, and face higher rates of pregnancy induced diabetes, and high blood pressure. But researchers add, those conditions are temporary, treatable, and not reason enough to exclude them from trying to get pregnant.

Now, for the ethical questions. All right, to you for the ethical questions, Ruth Conniff, is this good news or bad news for women, is it ethical for women to have kids in their 50s, or are we overblowing our reaction?

MS. CONNIFF: I kind of agree with the medical ethicist Roberta Springer-Lowey, who has been quoted a lot, for some reason, in these news stories. And she says, we will probably see more and more of this, and the root cause is that we are viewing medical care as a commodity now, not as a public good. It's something that you go out and buy. And I guess I would extend that and say, on the ethical issue, we're sort of viewing children that way. And that bothers me. I'm not going to tell an individual parent, you know, there are couples, I know couples, usually it's the guy who is in his 50s who are having babies, and they're wonderful parents, and I'm not going to say, these couples should be banned. But I think it's a little strange, and I think the whole -- the way that medical science has turned, especially motherhood, into more and more of a weird science project gets us away from the humane values about children and providing the right kind of nurturing environment for them.

MS. ERBE: Karen Czarnecki, quickly.

MS. CZARNECKI: I agree. Can you believe I agree with you completely on this issue. I think it is a little bizarre to be doing that sort of thing. But also your body starts to break down, as much as you may be able to have children, there are health questions that, you know, can you continue to care for these children later on, or will they become society's problems.

MS. ERBE: Congresswoman Solis, I am a woman who is approaching 50. I can't imagine wanting to have children in your 50s, but from a political perspective, what do you think of this development?

REPRESENTATIVE SOLIS: I think it's a woman's choice, and men are never questioned. I mean, Tony Randall, the actor, had a child at 70 years old. I think that women are probably in a later stage in their life, they're more mature, they probably have more financial security, and are really able to focus in on the nurturing and development of that child. I really think it's a personal issue. It's one that the government probably really doesn't need to get in and try to regulate.

MS. ERBE: Tara Setmayer, quickly.

MS. SETMAYER: I can't believe we all agree on this. Yes, because the government definitely needs not to legislate this in any way, shape or form. You don't want to play God. But, at the same time, you know, for men the physical ramifications of having children at 50 are a lot different than they are for women. It's taxing, you know, when you start to become 50 years old, there are just certain physical limitations that you may not be able -- that may cause you not to be as good of a parent as you would have been in your 20s or 30s or even 40s. That should be of some concern.

REPRESENTATIVE SOLIS: And men have less of a problem because. --

MS. ERBE: Hold that thought until after we go to credits.

That's it for this edition of To The Contrary. Next week, women and business ethics.

Now, back to our new look. We're trying on several new looks over the next few weeks. I want your feedback on them, as well as on what we say, of course. Please write to us at ToTheContrary@pbs.org, or visit our PBS Online web site at pbs.org.

Whether your views are in agreement or to the contrary, please join us next time.

(End of program.)