

It's About the People

International family planning and population policy have captivated the attention and commitment of Betty Butler Ravenholt '67, who firmly believes any discussion of environmental issues must acknowledge the fundamental importance of population. **BY NANCY MORELAND**

For Betty Butler Ravenholt '67, limiting population growth is the cornerstone of protecting the planet's resources, and she believes that it should be the foundation of all environmental efforts. Since the late 1970s, her work for a number of organizations providing family planning services in developing countries has been, essentially, her contribution to the environment.

"I do not know of anything that has more impact on the planet's environment than the number of people who populate it," says Ravenholt, who graduated from Agnes Scott, where she was a member of the 1966 College Bowl team that

defeated Princeton University on nationwide television, with a degree in English. "We cannot reduce our carbon footprint enough to make up for the rate at which our world's population is growing."

Following marriage and a divorce in those early years, she sold advertising for a small communications company, an experience she describes as "on-the-job training in marketing." This opened the door to a marketing director position at IPAS, a non-profit organization working globally to help women exercise their reproductive rights and to reduce abortion-related deaths and injuries. Ravenholt's first trip for IPAS took her to Mexico, and later she traveled to several Asian countries.

Additional opportunities arrived in the late 1970s when the United States Agency for International Development brought more women consultants into its ranks. USAID provides economic and humanitarian assistance worldwide, and Ravenholt was hired as a social marketing consultant because of her experience and an IPAS policy that allowed employees to consult.

"Social marketing uses marketing resources and tools to promote healthy behaviors," she explains.

During this time, she amassed knowledge about the contraceptive market and saw





TOM REESE

firsthand the need for family planning. In rural Ghana, for example, Ravenholt met women with as many as 17 living children.

"I commend organizations working to alleviate death rates in Third World countries," says Ravenholt, "but they must also address fertility control in order to maintain sustainability."

Her marketing sense served Ravenholt well while collaborating with government officials, medical professionals, educators and local populations. "In marketing you're thinking, 'What's the benefit to the consumer of this behavior?'" she notes.

Ravenholt's complex task was to facilitate foreign cultures' understanding of how family planning impacts quality of life and to encourage them to implement policies to promote it. She used marketing to accomplish her goals while building bridges between the private and public sectors.

"There weren't many of us working in this area," she recalls.

"Betty was the first real project director in private sector health," says Director of Private Sector Partnerships – One Project, Ruth Berg, who worked on the same USAID project Ravenholt pioneered. She credits Ravenholt's success to a

combined "understanding of business, health and policy." Ravenholt "could tell people what they may not want to hear . . . which is so essential to making progress," says Berg.

A strategic move

In 1981, Ravenholt moved to Washington, D.C., to direct the first worldwide contract for providing technical assistance for USAID-funded contraceptive marketing programs. She was employed by The Futures Group, forecasters of various issues, including the impact of growing populations on development. The company might predict, for example, future demands for education, health and employment if population growth continued at a given rate. When the firm won the contraceptive marketing contract, Ravenholt was hired as project director.

She also met physician/epidemiologist Reimert Ravenholt who became her second husband. Rei "directed the development of USAID's Office of Population, which was, for many years, the world leader in advocating for and providing family planning services worldwide," she explains. While they have never collaborated on projects, the Ravensholts often discuss family planning and population issues at home.

TO LEARN MORE

Reimert Ravenholt's Epidemic Investigations Web site contains numerous publications on the population issue: www.ravenholt.com

Population Reference Bureau: www.prb.org

Worldwatch Institute: www.worldwatch.org/node/3943

“Our planet represents a finite level of resources. Divide that by the number of people among whom those resources need to be shared—this equals the human condition.”

“Our planet represents a finite level of resources. Divide that by the number of people among whom those resources need to be shared—this equals the human condition,” she says. “I don’t think our planet has an infinite capability of producing what’s needed.”

She cites Jared Diamond’s book, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. Diamond asserts that a culture’s collapse stems from many factors, all originating from greater numbers of people needing more resources than a culture can support. Underscoring the impact of burgeoning populations, Ravenholt offers this statistic: “If a country’s growth rate is 3 to 4 percent, the population will double within 20 years.” She urges those who decry China’s loss of reproductive freedom to remember the Chinese population explosion that necessitated these restrictions.

Overcoming obstacles

Implementing family planning programs in developing countries is an intricate process. In many places, access to care is a huge hurdle to overcome. Legal restrictions and lack of government support also present obstacles. While challenges are numerous, Ravenholt says the importance of family planning can be narrowed down to two factors: the fate of the planet and women’s lives.

“Women deserve the freedom to live a healthy life and to take advantage of opportunities,” she says. “Repeated pregnancies and childbirths are two of the main causes of premature death and morbidity among women especially in developing countries.”

During her travels—which have taken her to such places as Haiti, Jamaica, India, Egypt

and Kazakhstan—Ravenholt witnessed the effects of overpopulation. Among poor Philippine families, young daughters are “leased” to Arab companies who, for payment, place these girls with wealthy Arab families to act as servants. While in the Middle East, Ravenholt was approached numerous times by

servants pleading for help because of mistreatment by host families. She recalls seeing 12-year-old servant girls with black eyes. In Kazakhstan, Ravenholt witnessed grandparents begging on the streets.

“One likes to think both extremes of age are protected,” she says. “A country that cannot control its population cannot hope to adequately care for its young or elderly. She says Africa’s lack of family planning is a fundamental contributor to many of its troubles, including land wars. In many African countries, fertile women using contraceptives is in the single-digit percentages, she points out.

One might explain away these difficulties as the Third World status quo, but Ravenholt cautions against complacency. She grew up understanding the risks associated with limited or no access to contraception. She remembers that girls who became pregnant were expelled from school—even in her class at Agnes Scott.

“Now, with access to contraception and safe, legal abortion readily available, the current generation of young women doesn’t understand what’s at stake when our government moves to make those things less accessible,” says Ravenholt. “Even though you may have created a general acceptance of the importance of women’s reproductive health, you can’t rest on your laurels. With each new generation, you start the education process over.”

When Rei retired, the couple moved to Seattle. She continued consulting while managing to nurture gardens—impressive enough to be featured in *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Fine Gardening*—around her cottage that sits on Lake Washington and overlooks the Cascade Mountains as well as the home of Bill Gates just across the lake. She still crusades for family planning and reproductive freedom while her husband writes an account of his work in the population field and works to solve challenging historical puzzles.

Ravenholt admits to being discouraged over the past few years due to lack of government support in the U.S. for family planning.

“The importance of family planning both to women’s health and to the health of our planet keeps everyone who works in family planning going,” she says. “If the political climate shifts, I will be able to continue this work.”

Nancy Moreland owns ConveyMore Communications, a professional writing and editing firm.

