

## Profiles in Social Work

### Episode 6 – Peter Martyn

**Intro** - Hi, I'm Charmaine Williams, Associate Professor and Associate Dean, Academic, for the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. Welcome to Profiles in Social Work. This podcast series is produced by our Faculty and Alumni Association. In 2014 the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work is celebrating 100 years of contributing to Social Work Practice and Education. You can find out more about us by visiting us online at [www.socialwork.utoronto.ca](http://www.socialwork.utoronto.ca) We're glad you could join us today. The series Profiles in Social Work highlights how social workers are making a positive difference in our communities by presenting stories of how social work graduates are using their degrees. We hope you will enjoy this series. Especially if you are thinking about a career in social work or interested in hearing about what social workers do.

### Profile – Peter Martyn

My name is Peter Martin and I graduated from the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 2007.

I kinda think it goes back to almost my childhood, in terms of worrying about the next guy; for example being at school and picking teams and always concerned about the poor person that doesn't get picked or gets picked last. In some ways I was born with this desire to sort of to look out for others. I'm Mohawk from the Tyendinaga Reserve and I left the reserve when I was eleven. When I sorta got into the history of my people and what they've been through, it just reinforced my desire to be in the profession that would maybe help a bit resolving some of those problems, certainly focus on the Aboriginal people, my people but also on others and learn about other cultures.

I was abandoned at birth more or less, I don't know who my father is still to this day do not know who my father is. And raised on the reserve in a variety of different families, not abused but certainly neglected and missing out on what the attachment stuff and the nurturing. It's certainly, played a role in my understanding as I got older, sort of the damage that that can do in your childhood and how you can carry that in your adulthood. With respect to the relationships for example and it's very difficult if you haven't had that in your childhood. I guess the good news is, with help when as you're



older, you certainly can address that type of concern and I have, but I did it with a traditional healer versus the mainstream methodology.

Because of my age, it was very interesting to sit in a group with such young eager minds with so many creative ideas, and over the time I spent here it was kind of interesting because I found myself at different times offering some very practical aspects to social work versus the theoretical base, which obviously important but nonetheless I'd been out in the working world, I've worked in a federal prison, I'd been a federal parole officer, I'd managed a residential program on the reserve, I'd worked a lot in addictions, I'd worked a lot in child protection, I was able to offer some very practical situations with respect to how you put this theory into practice and some of the roadblocks to doing that in the real world. Sitting there and learning about things like attachment, because in all honesty I hadn't really thought a lot about it in terms of my childhood and how that impacted on me so it was kind of an eye opener for me to and a revelation of sorts which really helped me process some of the difficulties that I've experienced.

I do a variety of things. I supervise a program with respect to social work amongst the Aboriginal population of the greater Toronto area which is a, huge in respect to the challenges. The population is roughly around sixty thousand that we try and work with. We work with a lot of single moms, for example, multiple children, and we work around areas like family violence and substance use. Poverty's huge, and it just doesn't apply to my people but poverty is a huge problem for anyone living in a large city, because for all intents and purposes, I think you're kinda forced to live in what would be a ghetto setting. Whereas 24/7 drugs and alcohol and violence, so it's a challenge just trying to get people to believe in themselves again. I like to refer to myself as a hope merchant, but that hope has to be based in reality. If someone is sitting there with a grade three and wants to be whatever, you really have to be talking to them in realistic terms, perhaps getting a GED or getting some credits that allow you to move on to this other stage because we can't change these huge systems cause they tend to be very large and in a lot of ways out of control but maybe we can take one person or one family and help them get out of the system and you can only do that a couple ways; you can win the lottery that's not gonna happen for a lot of folks, you can help them get a better education which allows them to go and get a job in the marketplace which allows them to escape the ghetto. The other way that you escape, of course, is through going to prison or being killed or whatever, that's the dilemma, and that's the challenge with respect to what I do.



I also, chair the Aboriginal Advisor Committee for the Correctional Service. So I have a lot of input as to how our men & women in prison are dealt with. And obviously, given that it's the Aboriginal population, we are overrepresented dramatically in all of these systems in terms of diabetes. The rate is something like five per hundred thousand in a non-Aboriginal population. In our populations it's twenty-eight per hundred thousand, and that has a lot to do with lifestyle and unclean drinking water and all those practical issues. And I have no problem with us being in Afghanistan and my son has been there twice, going again, and building wells and getting fresh water for those people but I really worry and wonder why some of our people still have still don't have fresh water.

I also do a lot of private consulting. I do reports for the Office of the Children's Lawyer, so I guess my message to a lot of people who are contemplating this type of career is "don't paint yourself into a corner. Think outside of the box, figure out where your strengths are and where you might want to plug yourself into and don't sell yourself short in terms of one area".

Given our history with respect to the residential school system and for example our relationship with child protection and governments per se, our belief is that you have to have the people that you are trying to help be part of the help and they're the experts in their lives, we're not the experts. And if you constantly put them in positions where you as the professionals always making the judgement they're going to just throw you on the heap of humanity of others who have made judgments about them. So we try to be very inclusive, we have to look at their strengths, we have to sit there in a circle without that boardroom table and we use a talking feather or a talking stick, a talking rock we pass it around. The circle is based on respect, and it's based on them telling us their story. And from their story we can come up with some ideas and suggestions about how we will help them address whatever the presenting problems might be, keeping in mind they have a lot of strengths. I mean people who are sleeping outside on grates have strength. To survive being homeless in the city like this is a strength, is a sign of strength, so you have strengths, and so often in mainstream, the focus has been on deficit, everything is about deficits. When you look at child protection it's always about deficits. A lot of our people have strengths too. And if you utilize those strengths in a circle, in a talking circle, it's amazing what you, what you can come up with. We have some of our protection workers who will be involved in that circle and it's interesting because they can form relationships, the family will invite them to the various ceremonies they might hold. And it's amazing to see how all that works because, I've, I've certainly walked into situations with twenty caregivers from a variety of places with a poor single mom sitting at this table and they're all telling her how wonderful, they're



going to hell with her in terms of the plan and the program, they don't get any feedback from her, they're just telling her the plan, and usually those plans are filled with what we call "can'ts", in other words, it's a "don't" plan. Well we're big on "do" plans and "can".

It's very good if we can take a lot from our culture and utilize it with respect to some of the mainstream methodologies. It's also excellent if you can take from other cultures. All cultures have something to offer if you open your eyes and you take a look. When you talk about heroes, a lot in our society, I remember and I would see this man on a bicycle in the middle of winter in a snow storm riding to his job, taking a bicycle to his job. Now, I'm sure he was making minimum wage, maybe a little more but who knows, but nevertheless he was there every day, trying to provide for a wife and children, see those are heroes to me, those are the real heroes.

For people that are considering a career in social work, they should think about themselves in terms of how they relate to others. If you have an outgoing personality and are able to relate to people easily, and well, it's a big benefit. Theory, obviously, how do you apply it and that's the job, I mean, that's the big leap, you're not going to change the world as soon as you get your diploma, if you focus on individuals and families and do it a little bit at a time, I think you can be a very good social worker. Don't get discouraged if things don't happen at the pace you feel they should, because again, it's the people you're trying to help that should be setting the pace not you. Just be supportive and help them when they falter a bit, acknowledge their strengths, acknowledge your own strengths and you're going to do fine in this profession.

When I wake up in the morning, my glass is full and I just spend the day trying not to spill too much. I don't look at things I don't have, I look at the things I do have and I appreciate them. My son, who has been to Afghanistan, got a real, real life lesson in terms of what we have and so when we feel sorry for ourselves, because we didn't win the lottery, or the price of gas went up, mmm, pretty small stuff really, when you think about, when you look at the big picture. And certainly the natural disasters that have happened recently, I mean, if that doesn't help you put things in perspective I'm not sure what does.

**Outro** - This is Charmaine Williams from the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. Thank you for listening to our podcast. In 2014 our school is celebrating 100 years of social work research, teaching and community service. For more information about the faculty and our programs we invite you to visit our website at [www.socialwork.utoronto.ca](http://www.socialwork.utoronto.ca)