

Profiles in Social Work

Episode 10 – Jen Plyler-Danch

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 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 – Jen Plyler Danch

My name is Jen Plyler-Danch and I graduated from the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 2005.

I'd been working in international development for several years, primarily in the Middle East and I decided I wanted to move back to Toronto and work in my own community. And when I got back I didn't actually have any local experience, specifically working directly with people to get a job in the community settings that I was interested in so I really saw getting a Masters in Social Work as an opportunity to get some practicum experiences in the types of local agencies I wanted to eventually have a career in. I did have a sense of where I wanted to be because I had been doing quite a bit of activism over the years in anti-poverty work, in anti-violence work, in Palestinian human rights work and I had volunteered at a homeless shelter here in downtown for a number of years in my undergrad and the coordinator of the shelter had a social work degree and I just thought her job was the coolest. We did movie nights, we had a clothing room, you know, we did special meals and holiday celebrations and she kinda coordinated all that as well as providing a lot of individual support and crisis intervention to the folks that use the shelter.



Grass-roots radical activism is really what I was entirely about at that point in my life. I realized that I was coming in to a program where my motivations for being here were very different from a lot of, my peers, so kinda learning about out why anyone else would get a masters in social workers besides me and what my motivation was. I took some classes and learned about some things that I didn't know anything about before I came into the Faculty and that I never thought would actually had served me in the type of work that I wanted to do, that have turned out to be incredibly valuable to me. For example the classes that I took in individual counseling that I didn't think I had any interest in whatsoever, have actually I think in retrospect been the most important classes I took here; because I always say to other people who have identified as activists that are thinking about post-secondary education, "Don't go to university to be an activist, you know that's silly". If you are really committed to activism and you want to develop some concrete skills to make you more valuable to your community then that's a good reason I think. So the classes that I took with some of the really brilliant clinicians and therapists here in the Faculty actually were really important to me in the long run.

I work for a recreational boxing project for women and trans survivors of violence and the idea is that we use physical activity and create a safe space to explore healthy aggression as a way to heal ourselves from violence and trauma and to build self-confidence and create a strong community of women and trans people who are building lives free of violence. We have classes twice a week, we run them on the weekends, where we get referrals from the hospitals and trauma programs in community centers and word-of-mouth and our website and our boxers come together and we do what we call boxing 101. So like, an eight-week course where they learn the basic skills and techniques of recreational boxing and also take the first steps to increase their fitness, build their cardio, increase their strength. A big piece of it is, particularly for women, getting in touch with how strong we already are, because a lot of us have a narrative in our head particularly if we've experienced a lot of violence and abuse that our bodies aren't strong, or that we're weak, or that we're not resilient and that, that actually is really not the case. And boxing is all about using your body to get as much force as possible to use your whole body when you throw a punch or to get the maximum impact. It isn't about your size or how big your muscles are. A lot of boxers in our program when they call up to register they say "I've been looking for you for fifteen years" and the they've known for a long time that this is, kinda something that they really want to do or something that they need and but there hasn't been an opportunity to engage in such an alternative model of trauma therapy. So some women really know

that this is what they want and they feel a great sense of anger over the injustices that have been done to them and need a safe space to release that.

We do get referrals from anger management programs or court diversion as well that this program can be a way of breaking cycles of violence where those of us who experience violence are so much more likely to act that violence out later in life because it's the model we've been taught. We box out of a women's boxing club here in Toronto, which is the first women's boxing club in North America. And the boxers come in on their first day and they're walking into a boxing gym which can be a little intimidating at first but also really exciting cause there's all the heavy bags and the ring and all over the walls we have photos and newspaper articles of the history of women's boxing, the first women's boxers in Toronto. Initially watching was illegal right through to the mid-eighties. They wouldn't allow women to box even at the recreational level. The nineteen eighties. The excuse being that it would give women cancer and so there were these two women boxers, they tried to have a match here in Toronto and Boxing Ontario, the Association, stepped in and said "no absolutely not! if you put those girls in the ring we're gonna have you arrested". One of those boxers was a lawyer and she fought it through the courts and won the right for women to box. So it's really only been about eighteen years since women have been actually even legally allowed to be training in boxing gyms. It's been just this past year that women won the right to compete in the Olympics so the first women's boxing will be in the Olympics in 2011 in London.

You come in the doors to this women's boxing space and you know you get acquainted with the space and figure out where the change room is and the bathroom and we try and connect all boxers with running shoes and workout clothes if they need it because most of them don't have that and we always have snacks and food on hand because most of the boxers in the program living far below the poverty line and you really can't work out hungry, can't build muscle and strength either if you don't have fuel in your body so that's a big piece of what we do. And then we start out the first day you would cover things like your boxing stance and learn what the different punches are; your jab and your power, your hooks and your uppercuts. We work on footwork, on defense, we do a lot of work around building core strength so sit-ups, and push-ups, skipping, kinda cover all those bases and we build up throughout the the weeks; and at any point if there's something that comes up that any of the boxers don't want to do, they just don't do it. Unlike a traditional boxing gym we really believe that each boxer is the boss of their own body and that she decides whether or not something feels comfortable for her to do or not. Traditional boxing coaches, they'd run you as hard as they could till you quit, or became a champion. We're about women or trans people who otherwise would



never have the opportunities to step into a boxing gym, getting an opportunity more so than we're about creating champions. But that said we do have a boxer that came out of one of our first Shape your Life groups that went on to win silver at the Canadian nationals this year, so that was really cool.

The boxers have an opportunity if they want to, to start learning some defenses well and to get in the ring with one of the coaches. We call it "putting the boots to a coach" which is where you get to get in the ring and you get to punch them for a whole round and they don't ever punch back. So it gives you the idea of what it's like to get in there and throw punches at someone, which is a very hard thing to do, particularly for those of us that have been socialized to feel really guilty about aggression or, you know, never wanna act out or defend ourselves physically. Lots of times, women every time they punch they'll say "sorry, sorry, sorry, oooh, oooh, sorry", you know. They'll actually get a shot in and "oooh sorry", ha ha, that's good. So they get that and if they're comfortable and they want to we also learn a little bit of the defense for themselves, how to block a punch, how to slip a punch, how to use your footwork to get away from a punch.

There's a lot of research that shows that physical activity helps us heal from violence, specifically the way that violence manifests itself in our physical and our mental health. So for examples of how it manifests in our physical health in irritable bowel syndrome, in fibromyalgia, in migraines, in ulcers, all of these are improved with physical activity but also the way it manifests in our emotional and mental health in terms of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic nightmares, also are vastly improved through physical activity. But in addition, getting to explore healthy aggression specifically, has a way of shaking up those symptoms of trauma in the body and helping us heal and release them and overcome them.

We're very lucky that our boxing project here has made a partnership with a youth lesbian center in Jakarta, Indonesia and their staff and members were interested in learning how to box, on one hand to do something a recreational activity together that would just be fun and social because there aren't a lot of spaces to be out and social in Jakarta particularly for lesbians, but also as a means of self-defense because they do face constant threats from fundamentalist groups that seek out Queer organizers all over the islands of Indonesia and there's been threats and bomb threats and attacks recently. Just two weeks ago there was an attack on a Queer conference in Surabaya an island in Indonesia, so for self-defense and so myself and our head coach had the opportunity to go to Jakarta and work with a group of ten young lesbians and kinda



replicate training for trainers or a workshop to help them become pure coaches. They've rented a gym space there and every Saturday afternoon it's just drop-in that young women who identify as queer can come and use the space and hit the heavy bags and learn the basic skills from their peers that have done this coaching course.

One thing that has been hard for me as the project coordinator as the social worker for this boxing project is that we're working in a very non-traditional environment. We're working in a boxing gym. I don't have the same resources and space available to me that I'm used to having in a community health center or social service agency. We've had to figure out how we support the boxers and all the other aspects of their lives where they need support while they're in the project from within the boxing setting. So we had to kinda create some binders of referrals, and got a computer in the gym so that we can research other services and stuff that might be useful to the boxers. But also because my coworkers are boxing coaches not social workers it was scary for me at times to feel like I was flying by the seat of my pants in this new project and providing social work support without really having a supervisor or a mentor on-site that I could bring a case to and discuss. So I think that's been one of the major challenges.

We get to get together with some of the coolest, most resilient, toughest women and trans people I've ever known, get fit and feel strong and punch stuff, and feel safe about it, and feel good about it. For me boxing and being part of this project has meant that I feel like I have a community of these strong tough women and trans people who have my back. Building a life that is free of violence is really about building a community that has your back to help you build a safe and healthy life. We had a boxer in the program who had broken up with an abusive partner and he wasn't allowed to come to their apartment but she wanted to move and she was afraid that if he knew that she was trying to move that he would show up and try to disrupt the moving and the truck. And so we put a call out on our list of boxers, "Hey is anybody available tomorrow morning to help somebody move", and twelve boxers showed up at ten a.m. the next morning, all women, and just hoisted all of her furniture onto their shoulders and went down four flights of steps and had the truck loaded up in twelve minutes. And so for me knowing that I have this team of really capable, strong people that I can call up at any time and we're gonna take care of each other is what it's about.

The term social worker doesn't really mean anything to me. I certainly didn't get a Masters of Social Work because I wanted the title of social worker. For me, what's important is having a commitment to social justice and believing that change is possible, and that you have something to contribute to that and then figuring out who your community is, that you wanna make this change with and how are you accountable



them, by what measures are you accountable to a community. You're passionate and in love with your community and that you're figuring out ways to be accountable to them.

Really the most valuable part of me getting a Masters of Social Work was the supervisors that I had in my practicum settings. And we say in a therapeutic relationship fifty percent of it is the connection you have with that client and I think that's true for work-learning opportunity that the most important thing is the connection you have with the mentor or supervisor there and I was really lucky in both my years of the program to have had practicum supervisors who had a huge impact on the way I see the world and were extremely passionate about the work that they did, were more dedicated and more professional, and more committed and showed more integrity of anyone I've ever known. That would be the advice I would give for student now is that when you're going out looking for those learning opportunities that you really try and find the mentors that you are going to connect with, because I think it counts for so much. And, you know in a lot of the surveys and research that I think gets done in community settings about social workers and what makes them helpful and what makes them harmful or could potentially make them harmful in helping roles, communities say over and over again that if you don't like what you're doing and you don't like the people you're working with you're really just doing more harm than good. We have a responsibility to always be asking ourselves honestly "do I still love what I'm doing? am I burnt out? if so what am I going to do about it? and how am I going to make sure that I'm in a good enough place that I'm doing responsible, accountable work?" and the mentors that I had really modeled that.

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