

Profiles in Social Work

Episode 16 – Judith Wolfson

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 – Judith Wolfson

My name is Judith Wolfson and I graduated from the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 1972.

I had done my undergraduate degree in English. I wanted to do a PhD in English. There weren't any jobs at the time for teaching PhDs in English. So I had to think about what else I would do. When I was in elementary school we had things called the Red Cross Clubs and it taught us Roberts rules of procedure. We learned how to run meetings and it was about charity. I also grew up in a home where charity and charitable giving and giving back to your community was a paramount value. So as I had to think about what I would do to earn a living if I wasn't going to be able to teach English, then I thought social work would be something that I might be interested in. Looking back at it and now seeing what the Faculty of Social Work is today; the richness of the programs now and the quality of the education now is extraordinarily good. In the 70's it was far more streamed. You were put into either community organization or into counseling in a rather rigid way and you didn't have the mix of programs that you have now. So you learned some skills but I don't think that it had the breadth of learning that we have now. Remember as well that in 1970 when I started my MSW, Toronto wasn't the Toronto of today. Toronto wasn't the diverse community it is today. So you were really here,

looking at social work as a profession, that would be a care giving profession and not as much of a profession that would be the center of rethinking our communities. Although there was indeed a community organization component and a great deal of thinking that had gone on in the 60s, obviously, and in the early 70s, but it certainly didn't have the integration of thinking that I think the programs have today.

My education in social work training specifically came from my practicum. I did my practicum in an excellent program in family work. One of the things that I learned that has stayed with me was that I learned how to listen, and I learned how to listen with my eyes as well as my ears. I learned how to understand systems. I learned systems theory. I learned that what you see is one little piece and when you listen really carefully and you watch carefully you understand a system and you understand that things impact on others. I've used that throughout my careers. I worked for five years as a social worker. I first worked at the hospital where I had done my training as a family therapist. Then I moved to Montréal and I worked in a family service agency and very very quickly had the opportunity to move into administration and youth protection services. I became the Director of court social services for Anglophone Quebec. Centre Services Sociaux de Ville Marie which managed all the court social services for youth. I had the opportunity to have a sense of the bigger picture. It wasn't just working with a specific family or a specific young person. It was looking at the system, seeing the gaps in the system and trying to find ways to do things like diversion programs for thinking at the programmatic level so that you could try and make some change as opposed to band aid treatment which did not appeal to me.

After working for about 5 years I went and did my law degree. I trained as a lawyer. I was a litigator and then I was a Deputy Minister in the government and I spent about 10 years doing policy and advocacy. Mine has been a bit of a circuitous route. I went and I was the CEO of the financial services in Canada that runs all the bank machines and debit cards. So you might say how did social work possibly get you through law, being a deputy minister and economic policy which is primarily what I did, through the banking world to the university? You know what's the thread? I guess one of the threads is to think about how do you make things bigger and better, and faster and cheaper, so that we all benefit. And there are profoundly strong values that the world of social work has and that I think we as members of the society hold dear, in Canada certainly; and it's part of giving back to your community, it's part of being a piece of that community that

says we are bigger than the sum of our parts. I would hope that some of the thinking that I did as a social work student, some of the reading that I did, helped inspire me to think about how do you implement those values.

Now I'm the Vice President of the University of Toronto. I am responsible for our university relationships that are university-wide which means the external face of the university. I am responsible for our relationships with governments, federal, provincial, and municipal. I am responsible for our international relationships that are University wide and I'm responsible for strategic communications and marketing. The University of Toronto is certainly Canada's foremost research intensive university. It's a first-class institution. We have the great benefit of people wanting to partner with us and we want to partner with the best universities in the world in order to give our faculty and our students the opportunity for collaborative work. So be it students doing student exchange or study abroad, or be it faculty who do their research all over the world, or be it a venue for people in other parts of the world to say I want to study with the best and the brightest in an environment that encourages expansion of ideas. My job is to bridge those relationships, be they in China or India or Brazil or the newly expanding environment or our traditional deep relationships with Europe, Germany for instance, or our relationships in Africa as we look to work for instance, in Ethiopia, all over the world. One of my responsibilities is to ensure that the U of T is understood for its quality and our values and that we bridge those relationships.

A graduate degree in social work is going to equip you to think, to present ideas well, thoughtfully, to have thought about the values that you want to be part of in your community, and to help inspire you to ask good questions and the minute you do that you're going to find your way. I understand the worry of thinking about "but what am I going to do with it?" I had that worry. That's why I went into social work. I'm certainly not doing what anyone would've thought they would be doing with an MSW. My advice is if you find an area of interest, if you want to be engaged with your community and I say community in its broadest sense, if you are someone who wants to play a role in making things better and see yourself in the mirror of making things better, than this is a wonderful opportunity. It can be the end of your formal education. It can be the middle of your formal education. But it will enrich you. The leadership in this Faculty and this university, the academic leadership is very, very strong. You have a Dean here at the Faculty who really wants this Faculty of social work to shine in the world and is constantly looking at how do we make it better - how do we have the kind of programs and attract the kind of students who will be leaders in the field. I think folks who have the opportunity to study here are very, very lucky indeed.

When I teach students I talk about it for me being a quiver, because we used to make quivers for all my sons. We used to make them bows and arrows. We'd make them out of birch bark and we'd make them a quiver. And then they would take their arrows and then they'd put in their quiver and they'd have their bows. I see every single thing that folks do as they're learning, as arrows that they stick in their quiver, and you never know when you're going to pull one out. Some are degrees. If I hadn't had my law degree, would I have been a deputy minister? Unlikely. My practice was an arrow in your quiver. You need arrows. And your job as a young person as I say to them is keep filling it. Don't worry about which arrow you're going to pull out! You'll have a full quiver and you'll pull out the arrow that you need at the time. Some of it is a degree; some of it's a credential on some of its learning. Some of it's a horrible experience. Some of it's a good experience. You don't know – so keep filling it up!

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