

## Profiles in Social Work

Episode 23 – James Felstiner

**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 - James Felstiner

My name is Jim Felstiner and I graduated from the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 1961.

I was really interested in working with kids and I did a lot of summer camp work counseling and then I did some volunteer work at a school next door to the very small college I went to in Philadelphia. And I liked that and I thought well, the best thing to do is be a teacher. But I look back on great teachers I had and they all had a wonderful strong love for their subject and there wasn't any subject that I loved strong enough, so I had to find something else to do. I happened to get in law school and I did take my third year at law school seminar taught by a world renowned professor of delinquency and within a few weeks of his course I realized that this is what I wanna do. Work with delinquent kids. I said 'can you get me a volunteer job?' and he did at a training school and I went out there as an unpaid, untrained in effect, social worker or big brother or you know counselor or confidante and talked to the same eight kids each Wednesday evening for seven, eight months. And I loved it.

I was very fortunate after I graduated from law school that I got a job as probably the first law clerk in the United States in a juvenile court. I really wanted to work more with kids and I wanted to be a judge. The idea of getting a social work degree therefore

fulfilled two needs – one would make me more competent or more ready to be a juvenile court judge and to be a better one. My first year I was very fortunate my first practicum was at the Big Brothers. And that was very good and it put me in contact with kids and I didn't want to lose that contact. Between my first and second years, my skills and knowledge from first year did get me a job as an assistant social worker at an Ontario training school for boys and I lived and worked with a very bright social worker there and I did and in fact become the intake social worker. This was a large school with a lot of kids and that was a magnificent Summer because we spent not only our forty hour week, but we were there every night almost every night after dinner and playing with the kids, being with the kids, travelling with the kids which is what I really enjoyed doing.

At that time there were no street workers really in Canada. I managed to get the funding for my own job and the settlement did hire me in 1961 when I graduated as a detached street worker. This work was done quite professionally, almost all the other street workers were very loosey goosey – go on the street and do something. I had supervision every week. I had to keep total reports on every kid I met with I had to record, keep a diary. I had to report every two or three months to this advisory committee. It was a professionally run social work position in a new field. The idea was to meet the kids of the neighbourhood who were in trouble and were not coming in to use the settlement. The settlement is a neighbourhood house, a drop-in house, had a swimming pool, a basketball court, games, music, but the street kids would not come in. They were detached; meaning I was detached from the settlement to go out to the streets to these unattached kids. The kids wandering, the kids dropping out of school, getting in trouble. About ninety-five percent of the kids I worked with had been in court or were in court during the time I was working with them. Hard to reach, tough, anti-social kids. A number of my kids had been in training schools and so forth. It wasn't hard to meet them. They were so anxious to have people to talk to and talk at. Within a few weeks I knew a lot of kids. What I did is I would go out and just spend time with them dealing with any problems and issues that they had, seeing in whatever ways I could help, either through individually counseling under the supervision. My skills were in relationships. I've always found it very easy to relate to kids, still do. Many of them had mental health problems, so that there were counseling sessions but often times I was working in a group, sometimes alone sometimes in a group, and I made it a practice of letting the kids know where I could be found and I knew where they could be found. I thought I was doing some pretty exciting work.

I thought I was seeing things that a lot of other social workers were not seeing and dealing with problems that weren't being dealt with and I got a great deal of publicity. I gave many speeches to all kinds of community groups especially women's groups. I spoke almost everywhere. I talked to teachers and principals and probation officers and court and so forth. I did my master's thesis on a section of the law that permitted children to be admitted to training schools without any court hearing whatsoever, just on order of the Minister of Corrections. I didn't like that and I studied a number of cases that had happened and tried to evaluate whether this was good or bad and the process and so forth. It was given to the Ontario government and was actually mentioned in the legislature and the Minister of Corrections of the time read it and said he didn't like this either and he changed the legislation. I don't know how many other students can say that their master's thesis got a change in legislation.

All along I wanted to be a judge. My street work, the four years I was in courts two or three days a week, more as a social worker, certainly not as a lawyer. I could not practice but trying to intercede on the kids' behalf with their probation officers, with their crown and so forth. A lot of that was in the juvenile court but I got to know the senior judge of the juvenile court very well. I had originally met him when he came down to lecture in my delinquency class and he wanted me to become a judge and he was very helpful. I had about two years after I finished my street work in 1965 where I had to scramble a little bit for a job and the ministry of corrections gave me in effect a tide over job. I was assistant director of training schools for six months and then the registrar clerk of the juvenile court retired and Judge Stewart chose me for that administrative position and I ran the juvenile court for three and a half years until in the Fall of 1970 the Ontario government chose to appoint me a judge.

Very shortly thereafter we opened the first of what were three satellite courts in metropolitan Toronto. The idea was to take the courts out to the people where they were. We dealt with a population of over half million people dealing with juvenile delinquency cases which in Ontario were under sixteen; crimes committed by kids under sixteen, child welfare cases, adoption and domestic disputes short of divorce and property matters. So what we were doing there was making a lot of custody and access orders and enforcing a lot of our own orders and high court orders. It was much different from other judges. I visited every training school where any of my kids were. Notice, my kids. I was very possessive. My cases, my kids. I was really interested in them. People would say "would you lose sleep at night?" and this is where the school of social work taught me a great deal. I could talk about my cases endlessly, but I did not miss my own sleep. I had my own life, my own family, I worked long hours always. I did not really take

the cases home with me. I left them in the office. Four years on the street was a huge education for me and I think I could relate to and understand the problems of the people in front of me. I'm utterly convinced it made me a much better judge and permitted me to be secure in my desire to be passionate. What permitted me to have so much fun and to be unique was the fact that we didn't quit when the clock struck four thirty. We quit when the case was over, especially in a child welfare case. Child was apprehended four days ago, brought before me, an immediate decision has to be made that day as to where the child is gonna go from that moment on. And it's a huge decision. Home, care or some other relative. We knew, everybody knew, that that decision often remained in place for weeks or months as the case went through the process. I could sit to ten o'clock with no, no thought about it, to make sure that I heard the parents and the children's aid and the children if they were old enough, which often times they weren't, but that I had a good feel because I knew that my decision made that first day was going to have a huge carryover. I don't see how you could be a judge in a child welfare court without hearing from the people directly. I would find it very frustrating to be a judge today because so much of what they do is now paperwork. I gather less hearing evidence, seeing people and learning about them.

I liked the child welfare because there was an opportunity to get somewhat creative and also I became very critical occasionally of what social workers were doing and I could say so. I, you know, had a position. That wasn't my goal, but I think it was a valuable experience for them and for me in that I would say "wait a minute, what about thinking about this" or "why so short, or why so long?" There was a fifteen year old girl, totally cut off from her abusive, drunken mother and terribly abusive step-father and her father was somewhere else, was appearing before me and children's aid ward and she had not been conforming to the wishes of the Children's Aid Society. She was living on her own and wanted support. And she was going to school but she wouldn't live in a foster home. So that when it was her crown wardship hearing her social worker said "your honour we are very pleased to have, it's not her name, we'll call her Joan as a crown ward, but we want her to know that if she does not come into our care, or if she does not listen to our rules, and if she just runs her own life, then shortly after she is sixteen we will terminate". At which point I apparently exploded and said "You will not! You will not do that! That's no reason because this girl just doesn't conform." And obviously it had a huge effect on the girl. The Children's Aid Society did not terminate her. She went her own way, which included finishing high school and going to college and up through twenty-one continued to have the financial support of the Children's Aid Society. Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years later I was at a very fashionable restaurant in Toronto and the waitress leaned down and said "were you my judge at forty-seven?" I

said “what? What?” Forty-seven was the address of my court so I recognized that. She said “you were my judge” and I said “I guess I must have been”. We sat aside and I said “tell me the story” and she told me. She had had a terribly difficult life as a child, but the fact that I made the Children’s Aid Society keep her gave her the opportunity to prove herself and she was working as a mediator and has her own business. This was actually her last night at the restaurant. She was going out full time as a mediator. These incidents are just wonderful. Make you think that not only did you maybe make the legal right decision, but you made the human decision.

I think many graduate schools now want people to work before they come. I don’t know whether it’s policy but if it is I would recommend it very highly. Especially if somebody wants to work here, why not go out, get if necessary a volunteer job doing what you think you may want to do for the rest of your life. I think that could be very helpful. A year or two of very different experience whether that be in a corporate office or in Nepal or in South America or in the Arctic, but doing something, perhaps in a field related to what you think you may want to do in social work, but certainly seeing other things.

It was a great deal of fun. I loved being a judge. I only left when I got really tired of lawyers ... after thirty years.

**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)