

Profiles in Social Work

Episode 27 – Eric Tappenden

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 - Eric Tappenden

My name is Eric Tappenden and I graduated from the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 1976.

I was all of 19 years old and had been doing an undergraduate degree in Political Science at the University of Toronto and I wanted to do something meaningful so I found a way to get a summer job actually in a juvenile probation office. Just loved the people I worked with. It was just a very, very exciting experience for me. I did some research work, I did some client work and at the end of the summer a senior probation officer said to me "you need to go to school to get into this field". I ended up applying to the Faculty of Social Work, found a stream that was involved with social policy planning and administration which was a perfect segueway from my political science and public administration degree, and so that's what I did.

I remember my professors. I remember all of them by name, the sort of quirky personalities they had, combined with their wisdom and their knowledge and their mentorship. I remember almost every student of the dozen that were in my concentration by name, the things that they contributed to my life, and the things I learned from them. I was 21 years old when I entered the Faculty and in those days they had half of the students coming directly out of undergraduate and half of them

being mature students. There were people who had been out working for five, ten, twenty, twenty-five years, who had come back to learn the same stuff I was going to learn. But they had the benefit of all of this life experience, many of them with families; incredible work experience. I remember learning that life is messy for everybody, not just for clients and that was good for me. But what a wonderful rich learning experience that I really grew and matured from.

My first job was in the provincial government, in the correctional system as a regional volunteer coordinator. So going into the institutional side of the system, recruiting, training, organizing and deploying volunteers in the correctional system. To do that I had to move to a small town in southwestern Ontario. I sat down with my regional director and I set some goals and we said "let's get 100 volunteers, recruited, trained, being supervised by line staff rather than being supervised by me and when we get to that stage then we can think about whether or not I should be staying or moving on at that point. And he thought, you know, that's, that's a couple of years right; it's gonna take a couple of years. Well seven months later I moved back to head office in the policy and planning area and helped developed a new job which was the policy planning coordinator for the provincial ministry of corrections. My Deputy Minister at the time, who was a graduate of the Faculty of Social Work, he kind of said, you know someday we'd like to have you kind of work on that. When I look back on it, one of the best, most fun jobs I ever had and a direct relationship to what I had studied here at the school in social policy planning administration. It was great.

So I was seconded from being the policy coordinator in the corrections ministry to management board of cabinet to help run a management improvement program especially focusing in on the policy area. And after a year the Director of that left and I became the Director of the project. It was called the management standards project. On the one hand, you know I was a fairly assertive, confident young man outwardly but internally of course, you know you're scared stiff. Can I really do this? Do I really have something to offer? Will people think I'm doing a good job? That insecurity was I guess enough to keep me on my toes, to not be too cocky and to consider it a good learning experience.

Three years was the longest that I was in any job that I'd had. I had nine jobs over thirteen years and four different ministries and agencies of the government. I just, I got tired of the politics of a large organization. I had always felt that you know to be able to overcome that red tape and actually accomplish something was a wonderful challenge, but I began to feel like I was spinning my wheels a little bit. But I decided at the age of thirty-five to leave government and an organization that I had gotten to know in the

cemetery business of all things came to me and said “we’re looking for a VP of marketing and public relations, would you accept the job?” and I laughed. I thought, yeah right, a cemetery organization, what would I want to do that? But as I began to think about it, it became very attractive and this was a huge organization in this large urban area that had been around since 1826, predated the banks in this country. Of course, the cemetery field I thought of, you know, dead people, how challenging was that right? But there are land use issues, there’s environmental issues, there’s planning issues, there are financial issues, business issues, social and emotional issues, all kinds of things that are involved in that kind of an organization. So I said yes. Three years later became the president of their new funeral division and then after three years of that I thought, you know what, wouldn’t it be nice to do the entrepreneurial thing and if I can build and develop and start and succeed in building funeral homes for somebody else, why wouldn’t I do that for myself? And part of the thinking was “wouldn’t it be nice to go back to my social work roots to kind of have direct interaction with people who need my help. And so that’s what I did. I opened my own funeral home.

We live in what I regard as a death denying culture. As human beings, when we are born and as we grow up we don’t focus on something that affects us all and that is death – even though that it comes to us all. We’re too busy acquiring things and dealing with relationships. We’re too busy living to think about dying. And so for many people death comes as an unpleasant surprise even though we know it’s going to come to us all. Being prepared for it is a healthy thing. And being prepared for it both logistically and emotionally is what I’m talking about. On any given day, I’ve had to learn to accept that I don’t control what I do. If someone in my community has their mom pass away and they phone and they say “I really need to talk to Eric because I know him and trust him”, this is a fairly intimate emotional interaction that they’re about to begin and they want to do that with somebody they know and trust and I’ve learned in my business, because it is a business as well as a ministry and a service that if people know you and trust you they’ll trust their mom to you.

In many fields of social work, crisis intervention is a part of the work. When someone has someone pass away, close to them, somebody that they love, their mother, their father, their wife, their husband, their son, their daughter, that’s a very traumatic event and in our culture the research shows that people on average make funeral arrangements once in their adult lifetime. Some people never have to do it, because their older brothers or sisters do it or some-one else does it. So it’s not something they have a lot of practice doing. We don’t learn about it in school. It’s not polite

conversation at a cocktail party. So people go into this process of spending thousands and thousands of dollars and having to deal with an emotional process that they probably don't deal with very often in life and they're responsible for organizing the tribute for that person and pulling together their family, often dysfunctional, as families become more and more messy and confused in our culture today and they come and they say "how do I do this?"

What used to be, thirty or forty years ago, you know there was kinda one way that people did funerals and so it was a fairly mechanical process. Two days of visitation and we have a service either in the church or the chapel and then you go and you do the burial and then you have a little reception afterwards back at Aunt Sally's house and that's the way it is, and that's the way it was. Well of course in our multi-cultural community, that's not the way it's done anymore. So even people though who have certain cultural traditions will come and say "I know in my culture we're supposed to do some stuff, but I really don't know what that is". And so we have to be the experts in how different cultures do the funeral process. The process of how do you deal with the body of the deceased, being respectful and dignified in the disposition of those remains and secondly the ceremonial, ritual aspects, the interpersonal aspects, the paying of tribute, the celebrating of the life. And so we have to become the experts in all of those things to say well, in your faith, or in your culture, or in your subset of a culture, here's how people usually do it, is that the way that you want to do it? And how can we help you do that in a way that is cathartic emotionally?

I run a business and I've had to make an investment of my money and other people's money in order to make this a successful business. People look at somebody in my kind of a job and say "wow, a funeral home owner, you must be somebody really really rich; you must be really well off". Nothing could be further from the truth; I was never wealthier financially than when I was a senior public servant. Some people think of working in this field as weird, what kind of person would want to become an undertaker and a funeral director. To me, I never look at someone in a casket or on the preparation table in our embalming room as a dead body. I just don't think of them that way. I think of them with a name, I think of them with their first name, I think that's somebody's wife, that's somebody's grandma, could have been mine – somebody's son, somebody's daughter. That's a person; A person that somebody deeply loved and I need to help them pay tribute to that person. I need to help them say goodbye to that person. And I'll tell you, there's nothing more satisfying for me than after I've helped somebody through two or three or four days of crisis, of having to say goodbye to a lost loved one and having that person come up and quite unabashedly, quite unrestrainedly, just giving

me a huge hug and saying “Eric, thank you so much for helping us through the last few days, I don’t think we could have done it without you”. I know that every couple of days I’m going to get a hug from somebody that’s going to be a genuine, spontaneous thank you .And that makes my life and my profession worthwhile.

One of the things that makes social work special is its breadth. Social work stretches you, it offers you a huge, huge array of things to think about, of things to study, of things to research, while you’re going through school, whether you’re going on the outside of the system fighting for change or whether you’re on the inside of the system developing policy and administering a system of helping people, there’s a huge array of opportunities that social work helps prepare you for. The broadening for me here was a wonderful preparation for everything I’ve done in my work experience. It’s something I don’t ever forget, it’s something I’m very grateful for throughout the last thirty-five years since I graduated.

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