

Profiles in Social Work

Episode 45 – Paulina Wyrzykowski

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 – Paulina Wyrzykowski

My name is Paulina Wyrzykowski and I graduated with a combined JD/MSW degree from the University of Toronto Faculty of Law and Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 2004.

I knew from a relatively young age that I wanted to work with social justice issues. I actually did an undergraduate degree in psychology and I decided I wanted a more systemic approach, so I was interested in social work fairly early on. But I also felt like social work by itself wouldn't quite give me all of the right tools which is why I combined this degree with the law degree and in fact I chose the University of Toronto because it was the only university nearby that offered a combined Law and Social Work program.

It was a very emotional time for me because it was the first time that I was getting into field work, not just through the Faculty of Social Work but also through the Faculty of Law. So that's when I began working with refugees in the very first summer after my first year of law I went overseas to Cairo where I was working primarily with people who at that time were escaping the war in Sierra Leone and Liberia and also the Sudan. So it was very intense work and I came back a little bit shell-shocked, and I went into my second year which was much more heavily social work. There was a course that I took on narratives and it allowed me to explore my personal narrative at that point which was



important to me because I was trying to make sense of why I was going into this very difficult field and how I was going to handle the emotional content of it. So that course allowed me to explore that and also explore different approaches such as narrative therapies; and it was excellent.

I do remember that it gave me the opportunity to look for some tools for how to cope with that kind of work and I became very interested in trauma and very interested in secondary traumatization; also in cross-cultural practice. What I remember most I think about that year is my placement, and that was an incredibly valuable experience. I think that it was all part of a process of learning how to do very difficult front-line casework without becoming overwhelmed and what I really loved is that they had a very informal approach to clients that people could really come in and feel welcome and the organization was willing to go out of its way to embrace them and meet their needs, and if that meant giving them tea or giving them a snack, giving food. It did not have an institutional feel at all. It felt like a welcoming place to me as well.

Having this combined degree allowed me to explore two different ways of thinking about the same issues. The legal way of thinking about things is very logical, very A – B – C, The law is a very powerful tool but it's a restrictive tool as well. It allowed me to think from a very rights based perspective. The social work degree offers a somewhat broader perspective, more focussed on individual feelings and emotions and also social pressures that come into play. But I found that in some ways emotionally more challenging and it definitely gave me more of the tools that I need. This combined degree gave me access to opportunities that I wouldn't have had otherwise. So for example I was able to apply for the International Human Rights program through the Faculty of Law. So for three years in a row I went overseas sponsored by the Faculty during the summer to do refugee work in Cairo. So by the time that I actually graduated from the two degrees I had a fair amount of frontline experience already.

I did start doing refugee work in private practice immediately after graduating and then after two and a half years of that I decided that I wanted to do overseas refugee work again. So I went to Uganda where I worked for a fairly well-known organization there, it's all Ugandan, their mandate is to assist the refugees flooding into Uganda from neighbouring countries. And so for three years I was working with refugees and also with internally displaced people on issues of peace, justice and reconciliation because Uganda at that time was trying to sign a peace deal that would end a twenty year long war. And so we were involved in looking at what needs to happen for people to be able to go home. From reconciliation point of view, from a justice point of view, from a practical point of view and that was an incredible experience both professionally and



personally, probably the two and a half best years of my life. Then I came back to Canada and I realized that I didn't want to be in private practice, that I really wanted to do something that was more explicitly social justice oriented but also community development oriented and that's how I ended up in the position that I'm in currently.

I work for a large social services agency based in west Toronto. We have six locations overall, and it's a multi-service agency, so it provides services to the community that range to after school programming for young children all the way to care for the elderly and supportive housing programs. I am responsible for the newcomer settlement programs of which there are several across the house. I manage a team of staff who work day-to-day with immigrants and refugees and I also serve as a community resource on issues related to immigration. A lot of it is coordination, so making sure that I connect with the frontline staff, that if they have questions about individual cases they can debrief them with me, that I can give them advice on what to do and where to go. Also building up new partnerships. I work on expanding and maintaining our role in various coalitions and community networks; Going to community meetings, making sure that I sort of keep on top of everything that's happening in immigration but also in the broader social services field and look for intersections and implications for our clients.

One of the reasons why I really like the organization I work for is because in addition to having a service provision mandate it's also very keen on community development. It really values a grassroots approach and it really values empowering people; And that's not just a part of its vision, that's actually what happens day to day. So we work very closely with the community to try to find out what people's needs are, what they would like us to help with and how we can empower individuals and communities to actually help themselves. For example we discovered that many newcomers don't have access to government funded ESL programs. And so we helped to organize volunteer led, community classes and settlement groups for newcomers where they are offered this opportunity to learn English for free that they otherwise would not have access to. We also have a number of very innovative programs. For instance we have staff who go into homeless shelters and try to find those people who had fallen through the cracks in the system. People who have immigration issues but also have mental health issues and because of a combination of those they were never able to get settled in Canada and ended up on the street at some point. This involves very intensive sort of one-on-one work to try to get people's mental health issues addressed at the same time that you're trying to get them into housing and trying to sort out their immigration status, and that's a very unique program.



I definitely emphasize an anti-oppressive approach in all of my work. That's very, very important to me. It's important to the organization. For me anti-oppressive practice means recognizing the power and historic inequality that exists between people because of things such as race, age and ability and recognizing that those power differentials are systemic; Being aware of them within yourself and also within others. Continuously interrogating your own assumptions about people and coming from the perspective that you are really there to serve and that most people know what they need and what's good for them. That sometimes they need facilitation and how to achieve that, but that a good social worker primarily should listen to what people need before trying to assist.

The biggest challenges now stem from the political environment that we work in. Social services generally have been getting cut back. It's not a great time for refugees or immigrants. There's a massive amount of change within the immigration legislation that's taking place especially for people who are marginalized already those changes are very punitive. It's much harder for people to access healthcare, it's much harder for them to stay in Canada and manage to settle here.

When I first started out, seeing the impact that it made in individuals' lives when I managed to make sure that somebody actually got refugee status; that was a great joyful day. When I managed to put through a successful sponsorship so somebody was reunited with their spouse that meant a lot to me. Now a lot of my rewards come through the frontline staff, so still hearing those stories but also feeling like I have a real role to play in public education for example. Being able to go out to other community organizations and serve as a resource to people, and answer the questions that they have and feel like it's really making a difference because those questions, they don't have another resource to go to. I feel really necessary that way and that gives me a great source of satisfaction. I work with some terrific people. Feeling like I'm a decent supervisor. My team, I hope, feels that they're well treated. We work very well as a team. It's a very multicultural team that I supervise and that's also very challenging and very satisfying. Increasingly also my abilities as a manager and how well I handle that and all the different stresses associated with it are a great source of pleasure.

I think there's different kinds of social workers out there. There are people who really only really want to work with individuals and help individuals to further their own goals, which is fine. For me social work is much more about social justice. It's about trying to work towards a society that I feel is just. Now this is obviously very idealistic and I don't expect to see this within my lifetime, if ever. But I think how we position ourselves in the world is very important and social work gives us the opportunity to see some of the



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injustices that are taking place and therefore having seen them to be able to at least speak about them and try to redress them.

Having moved away from law I often have people ask me you know, “do you ever regret that decision”? And the truth is “no”. In my current work I need the legal knowledge in order to understand the legislative changes in immigration, to be able to support my staff, to know when we’re in over our heads and need to refer for example. I need to be able to understand legislation in order to understand people’s rights but at the same time I use the social work skills that I got here every day in terms of my management, in terms of how I approach clients, I’ve actually continued doing the same kind of work.

Depending on what area you go into it’s a really great career.

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