

Profiles in Social Work

Episode 7 – Sarah Felix Burns

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 – Sarah Felix Burns

My name is Sarah Felix-Burns and I graduated from the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 2002.

I did women's studies and history for my undergraduate and I was considering going into Law or Social Work and I ended up choosing Social Work because it seemed more altruistic and less capitalistic than Law. I really wanted to help people and I felt that social work was just the right fit for me and it was the right venue to get me into the kind of work I felt compelled to do.

What really stands out is how accessible the professors were. I still actually keep in touch with a couple of them. I remember a year-end, a course end party that we had and it was like a fireside potluck, wine & cheese and all that. So just that bond with the professors that really stands out and the other thing that was really unforgettable was my two practicum placements. My first one was at the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture, working with trauma survivors and the second one was at a residential addiction center.



Right after I graduated, I started working at a homeless shelter for women with children and from there I went on in the same agency and I worked as a child protection worker and I also worked in that field with people who suffered from addictions. I did that for a couple years and then I moved to the current town I live in and I was working as a case manager here, before I quit my job to have children and to write books.

Well I write literary fiction and I have two published novels. My first one is "Jackfish, The Vanishing Village" and it was published in 2007 and my most recent one is titled "Song Over Quiet Lake" and that was published in 2009. "Jackfish, The Vanishing Village" is about a broken individual who experienced horrific abuses as a young woman and the story follows her as she goes on with her life and becomes a mother and she tries to heal and come to terms with what happened with her. "Jackfish" refers to the village that she's from in Northern Ontario and it's actually a real historical fishing village which is now abandoned and pretty much extinct. One of the main themes that runs through the novel is the loss of homeland and coping with an alternate identity due to being displaced and this element was really largely inspired by my experience working with refugees during my first year MSW practicum. And my second novel, "Song Over Quiet Lake", is actually told from multiple first-person narratives, so it's got about six or seven different characters who were telling their stories. And the two main characters throughout the novel, one of them is an elderly native woman from the Yukon and a younger white woman whom she befriends in a women's studies class at the university in Vancouver, and that was inspired by my real life experience. And the novel is essentially about race relations and helping one another in the healing process across the boundaries of age and race and experience. And one of the main issues in the second novel is losing a child and being lost as a child and this was influenced by my second year MSW practicum and there I worked with women who had their children apprehended by social services and often these women were seriously victimized themselves as children so a lot of that made its way into "Song Over Quiet Lake".

Being a Social Worker its part of who I am, it's how I think, it's part of my identity and it's a big part of how I write. Actually having a social work background has really helped me as mother as well. I have two young children and it was really good preparation for the role of parenting.

For someone that's considering an MSW program, I can tell you that it's a really grueling and rigorous program but the experience really stays with you and propels you through the rest of your professional and personal life and you don't have to read every journal



article to benefit from the MSW program. The biggest piece of advice that I could give is to get to know the professors and the fellow students and really take advantage of the practicum experience because you learn so much from people on the ground there.

I had some experience at the University of Toronto, the Faculty of Social Work. Several professors at the faculty were unofficial mentors to me. They really encouraged and supported me during the time that I was there and I still keep in touch with several of them and I'm so inspired by the work that they do, when I read about what they're doing in the alumni newsletters and such. Also in the two practicum placements that I did through the Faculty of Social Work, they allowed me to meet some really amazing practitioners in the field who taught me a lot about the real-life on the ground experience and you can't always get that just from the classroom learning, so I still keep in contact with them as well.

Part of what I'm doing now as I'm writing full-time and I do fiction writing, but people actually contact me through the internet or write me letters and they tell me how my book has changed the way they thought about something or has opened their minds to some issues that needed to be thought about in one way and now they have more perspective on that. Other people have contacted me and said that the book really resonates with their personal experiences and that they don't feel so alone anymore. So writing these types of books that I do that are really infused with social work issues is a really good way of reaching a large number of people with the social methods.

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