

Profiles in Social Work

Episode 13 – Steven Solomon

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 – Steven Solomon

My name is Steven Solomon. I graduated from the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 1994.

I often joke that I'm a bit of an accidental social worker. When I began my bachelor of social work, I had a particular focus going into it in the area of labour studies, and then by my graduating year, I had moved into work with LGBT students in the school board. Where I started, wasn't where I finished. Continuing on to the MSW here at U of T, allowed me to continue some of that work.

What was significant for me was a variety of courses that would span individual work, and policy work and, coming out with a BSW I was quite certain of what I wanted to take so I felt quite confident in putting together the academic timetable. But really the field practicum was what really underpinned my studies, being like three days a week so you're out there in the field doing the work. It was a wonderful opportunity to sort of meet new friends and eventually they become very strong colleagues out in the field; Meeting some really supportive faculty; Doing classroom work around anti-oppression and equity work, specifically around homophobia. When I think back to my first time standing in front of a group of students and talking about homophobia and heterosexism and how nervous I was at the time, now its second nature to do that. That opportunity

to really get out there and practice, the word practice really captures it 'cause it is practice, right, you make mistakes you get yourself back up and continue with it.

The practicum was this whole full-on experience of molding my professional identity as a social worker. I went into the MSW thinking, "okay, I don't know everything", and I came from a place of not knowing, so I was quite open to the opportunities that the practicum gave me around counseling and around activism in the classroom and then to bring it back to the class discussions both the field and the classroom gave me opportunities to take some risks and to try some different things. And of course coming into a new place you're always coming out, whether you identify as lesbian, gay, bi or trans. Meeting a few other "out" students made all the difference in the world to weave that kind of personal experience into a professional identity.

The work at the school board would become my position now, actually. I'm working in the program that I did my placement in. As a school social worker with the Toronto School Board, individual, family and group counseling and support with lesbian, gay, bi, trans students, teachers, parents families: Issues of coming out, kids coming out to their parents, parents coming out later in life, all the kind of counseling conversations specifically with LGBT students and families. And then the workshops in the classroom, so getting invited into classrooms across the school board to talk to kids about homophobia and heterosexism and transphobia and kinda help them break down some of the myths and misconceptions that often fuel some of the untoward or much of the untoward behaviour that our students experience in our schools whether they are lesbian or gay themselves or students being raised in open gay or lesbian families. I really often joke to people that "Hi kids, I'm gay do you have any questions?" and some of their hands start go up and the conversation begins.

If I trust the kids to take me somewhere with something, if I sorta give up some of the power control, it's risky, right, cause eight year olds are amazing but give them too much decision-making and it's snacks all day long. Really, it's to trust kids to take the conversation. Issues start around homophobia and issues like that, but I've had the most awesome discussions with third graders around issues of class bias. They don't have that language, but they know something about money and where you buy your clothes and what happens if you buy your clothes there and not there. They live it, the kids live it. So finding ways to crack open that discussion, they're ready to talk about stuff but it has to be in ways that they can feel comfortable with and my comfort is, you know, beside the point, sorta what the kids want to do. So if I trust them to take over the conversation with reason, so far I haven't been disappointed.



Storytelling is a key component of my practice, it's always about telling a story, whether it's with an individual or with a group of thirty six year olds. Telling a story to kinda move them forward or get them to think about it. Ultimately the stories continue, so they're not always finished, they continue to be unfinished. The stories begin particularly with the younger students in the work I get to do, which I still kinda shake my head that I get paid to do it, that's the, that's the bonus, is thinking about all the different ways that kids can learn. So kids can learn by hearing, kids can learn by seeing. Storybooks with younger kids, right, whether it's stories about different families or stories about particular difficult situations; using visual cues to help the kids understand. And really, like, talking to six year olds in ways that they can understand. So giving them definitions that work for them. Often, little kids when I define words like lesbian or gay, older kids will come up with more involved ones like physical and romantic attraction. The little kids have it pretty much burned down to, "well you can like someone, but you can *like-like* someone". And it becomes this wonderful way of, even to use with older students. And yeah, if we ask the kids the right questions in the right ways, they can talk about this and they can make meaning out of it so it's not the big scary subject that some people are concerned about. It's really using a storybook and telling some stories and asking them questions. It's amazing to watch the look on a grade two student's face when something comes up and I turn and I say "what's your opinion on that? What do you think about that?" and I don't think we do enough of that to, to sorta see what they're really thinking about and giving them some space to use their voice. It won't be polished or articulate by no means but that's true of a lot of adults I know.

I also do provide social work support to the Triangle Program, which is our high-school classroom in the TDSB specifically for LGBT students who have either left school or are thinking of leaving school because of homophobia or transphobia. But for many students to continually be pushed out of our school system because of hostility and lack of safety. The Triangle Program helps students come back to school and resume their academic studies and earn their credits in a place where they can feel more comfortable and affirmed. So the social work support in that regard is all the types of adolescent issues you might face but specifically with LGBT students. For many of our students are living on their own, so having a lot of problem solving social work around finding housing, keeping housing, finding appropriate and meaningful health care, conflicts with family, conflicts with peers. The non-academic support to the students is what I get to provide as the school's social worker in that capacity.

Today, I spent the day with about four hundred grade sevens and eights at a public school, and it's wonderful. The kids can definitely handle the conversations. You do it



in ways that they understand and you try to move them forward and help them challenge themselves around their use of put-downs and some of the myths and misconceptions that they hold. The rewards from that are hearing students kinda take up this work, so after the workshop the students make their own personal commitment to change some behaviours or to be a supportive person in the life of a fellow student who might come out to them.

The challenge is that it is always unfinished. Equity work, whether it's in this area or in the area of race and gender and class is messy, it's really messy work. The continual systemic issues of discrimination that find their way into the lives of students or the families I work with, the structural issues around funding in the school board, those things continually impact how I think about the work and how I move forward with it. The rewards of seeing students make some connections to issues of homophobia and how it relates to how students can be made to feel unwanted and that everyone has a role; the students themselves, my colleagues who are teachers or administrators in the school board. More people need to pick up, do more of the heavy lifting if you will. Many times equity work is left to a few people to do and that's unfair. It's a reality, but if more people do the lifting then it gets a little bit lighter. Maybe it might be a little more closer to being finished. Fourteen years into it, it's still unfinished work.

Being a social worker being responsible to those that we work with. Being a social worker means not taking yourself too seriously, but taking the work seriously. At the end of the day, it isn't all about us per se, but about the work that we do and the conversations that we open up or the crises that we step into or get pulled into. Being a social worker means challenging myself and challenging those I work with. Being a social worker means unpacking the ways in which social work itself historically has been a contributor to issues of oppression. There are ways we have to implicate ourselves and we have to implicate our profession and take steps to move forward in ways that are gonna be more inclusive. Being a social worker means having a sense of humour. Like any work its heavy, it's heavy and you need to find ways to support each other and at the end of the day, have a sense of humour, otherwise it can be quite maddening.

There's so many different types of social work, maybe push yourself into something that you might not have thought you would want to work, whether it's a particular setting or particular population on the lifespan. I was surprised to find out where some of my modest strengths lie, cause if you had asked me fifteen years ago, if I would've been doing this kind of work I'd would've said you were crazy. Making those connections with mentors and those who would gently and sometimes firmly push you to, to question a



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decision that you had made about where you would want to work. Those who tell you what you need to hear and not tell you what you wanna hear.

So to consider social work is to consider all the different ways that we can do social work, and not to be limited by a preconceived notion of it, but always leave a little bit of room to be surprised at what you might find, or what you might discover.

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