

Profiles in Social Work

Episode 19 – Notisha Massaquoi

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 - Notisha Massaquoi

My name is Notisha Massaquoi and I graduated from the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 1997.

My undergraduate degree was in psychology and my first job out of university was in a woman's shelter. I was hired to work with children who had experienced domestic violence, either witnessed domestic violence or had experienced violence themselves in their homes, help them to cope with the situation and help them come to some kind of resolution while they were living in a women's shelter with their mom who had left a violent situation. And I felt after doing that work which was extremely difficult, that I needed more education, I needed a more solid understanding of issues of oppression and really understanding what I could actually do as a professional in terms of helping people in a more effective way; And my supervisor at the time had a master's in social work and she was really influential in telling me that you know what, social work is a great profession, I was working a lot with Children's Aid at the time and interfacing with the social workers that were working with the kids. I also was really aware of women of colour and their kids not having the same level of supports as their white counterparts in the shelter. There were very few social workers of colour, very few people who spoke a second language, very few people who understand some of the cultural issues that

were happening for those women and their kids. So all of those experiences were the thing that really pushed me to continue on with my education and to look at social work as a way of working better with the communities that were more reflective of who I was.

I deliberately chose to come to this Faculty because I thought, well that's what I'm looking for: something that's going to address the cultural issues that I understood to be part of the disconnect, especially communities of colour in Canada and their interface with social services or healthcare or accessing services. So I wanted to be in a program that was going to at least acknowledge that there were some problems and a program that was going to help me use my skills to work better with these communities.

I would say I really struggled in the program. It's an important experience and I think it's one that's really shaped what I went on to do after. As a black student coming into that program, it was still framed as the client was going to be the person of colour or the marginalized person and the social worker was going to be the white person who had to learn about these other cultures so that they could work with them more effectively. My experience was that I was going to be a black woman of African descent who was going to be working potentially with people from that same culture or other cultures or the other culture for me was going to be white; so my client might be white and how do we work through some of those issues. I was going to be the person of colour as the social worker. There is a big disconnect for me. I spent a lot of my program challenging every class. So challenging the professors, challenging the reading choices, challenging the policies.

I left the Faculty and decided that I was going to go and definitely choose to work in an environment that was reflective of my culture and I was going to work in an organization that served African people, because that's who I felt more akin to, and I wrote a book chapter for a book that looked at anti-oppressive social work practice. So I talk about going to work in an African community and going to develop programs as a social worker for this community to deal with HIV, in an HIV prevention program and I go to a very large African event and I use what I would call a mainstream method of doing outreach in this community and it terribly, terribly backfired because it did not work within the cultural context that I was working in. And in that moment I blamed my social work practice and education for not equipping me to work effectively with my own community. In hindsight I can say that it's not about the content of the education. It's the tools that I was given that are all the tools that I actually need as a social worker so I understand oppression, I understand what social justice means, I understand that as a social worker I'm supposed to challenge the system, I'm supposed to overturn the system. I'm supposed to ensure that my marginalized clients have access to services in

the most equitable way. The Faculty did tell me that. It is about understanding what social justice means and what am I supposed to do in terms of being responsible to my clients. How I'm supposed to be responsible to society. How I'm supposed to illuminate injustice if someone else doesn't identify it. That's my role. They may not have the tools to help me go and work specifically with a West African population who's dealing with HIV. They're not going to give us the tools to work with every single possible configuration of client that we might engage with but they do give me the tools to understand who I'm supposed to be in my role professionally as a social worker. In hindsight I could say what they did enable me to do is find a voice to be able to stand up and challenge the system, to give me space to do that, to at least listen. I can look back ten, twelve years later and say that I think it was effective. I can see the changes. So something worked. And then what it's allowed me to do and how it's allowed me to reflect on how valuable that degree is and those skills are to society.

Currently I'm the executive director of a community health centre and it's the only community health centre that specifically serves women in North America. We specifically work with racialized populations, so women prioritized from Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America and South Asia – women of colour. And all of our health services are geared towards understanding what the health issues specifically are for those populations and working to ensure that those women have equal access to healthcare regardless of where they are trying to receive services in the system. So we have an advocacy role in terms of helping women navigate the healthcare system but also we provide healthcare that's really culturally specific. We're a feminist organization, pro-choice, anti-oppressive, anti-racist and we ensure that all women have access to services regardless of sexual orientation, sexual identity, so we kind of look at all the areas where women might be experiencing marginalization or oppression and fill all of the gaps in terms of healthcare. It's a pretty exciting place to work and I bring all of my social work skills to that job every single day. It's my responsibility to ensure that we function as a health centre but we're also advocating for women's healthcare and women's rights internationally, nationally, ensuring that healthcare policy doesn't marginalize women further; immigration policy doesn't marginalize women further. So we look at all of those systems that impact on women being able to access services.

The social workers in our organization are the core of what we do. The social worker is probably the first person the client's going to see, they're going to have the biggest impact on what types of services those clients get and they're probably going to be the last person the client sees when they're leaving the organization to make sure they're

going out into the world effectively. So the social worker really, really has a strong role to play.

I didn't go from social work school to executive director. I have a really strong understanding of frontline and that's a really key thing to have. I really focused on research and policy when I was in social work school. I was really interested in how policy impacts communities. What they get to see me do are very mundane tasks actually as an executive director in terms of making sure that the service exists. My intent is to ensure that all women have equal access to healthcare. So I have to think about that every day when I walk through the door. I need to make sure that that service runs effectively.

In our health centre we were finding a lot of women who were coming to receive healthcare and not having documentation; and usually they would come to see us because they were pregnant and they had to come for service. They had to deliver their child. And when their child would be born, the child would not have Canadian status because mom didn't have Canadian status. We kept seeing that over and over again: children being born in Canada, not receiving Canadian status, not being able to go to school and not being able to receive effective healthcare. One of the things we started doing was lobbying for that law to be changed so that at least the children that were born in Canada could receive Canadian citizenship and all the rights that Canadian citizenship brings you, particularly around healthcare and access to education and services. We continuously had to lobby every time a child was born. And then we enlisted the aid of lawyers, we enlisted the aid of other healthcare facilities and continually kept bringing the issue forward to our MPs, our MPPs, our local city councillors and all of the people that would be able to make some sort of change in effectiveness, bringing on obstetricians, lobbying the hospitals – we did that for about three years until a law was passed that children born in Canada regardless of the parent's status could actually receive Canadian citizenship. So as a social worker what you notice is individuals having the similar experience or similar difficulty, and then realizing 'you know what' this is actually something that's a larger systemic issue. How do I address this individual and then how do I move that to a systemic solution, that's going to impact people. Because we could as social workers continuously keep helping one client after another and that takes a lot of energy. If I change the system I can move on to another issue.

The reward is that you see change. I don't think they necessarily tell you in school that change takes a long time and you have to stick around to see it happen. So the reward for me is to actually see systems change. When I see that continuously changing in

terms of more services becoming available, laws changing, our city has changed dramatically including fifty percent of the population of our city are visible minorities, or what used to be minorities. The reward for me has been being a part of it; knowing that the work that I've done has contributed to that change somehow. Even that one client that comes back to say "I came to your organization when I first arrived in Canada and now I'm working, my child is in university and if you hadn't given me the opportunity to use your service I don't know what I would have done". You get that one client coming back to tell you that "you know what; my life is different from the time you met me to now". You can say "OK, it was worth it". Those are the things that make you smile.

It's an extremely valuable degree to have. I actually walk out in the world and I'm very proud to say that I have an MSW. But then saying I have an MSW holds a lot of responsibility. And what I'm saying is that I'm a steward for populations. I'm a steward for individuals; that I am making a commitment to support individuals on their journey. When you meet a client or a group that you're working with, you're not the most important person in their life. You feel like it because you have a lot of power as a social worker, but you are someone who they are meeting on their journey and you are just gonna help them get to the next level and it's really important to understand that that's our role, we're taking it very seriously when we take on the title 'social worker'. It holds a lot of responsibility and it's important that when you're entering the program you understand that. You can't take it lightly and you can't abuse the privilege of holding that title.

It's really interesting to be able to look back and say that you know I actually picked the right program for me because the challenges that I experienced are the same things that helped me go out into the world and deal with bigger challenges. The experience, it really shaped how I was able to move in the world.

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