

Profiles in Social Work

Episode 34 – Bernice Bell

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 – Bernice Bell

My name is Bernice Bell and I graduated from the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 1964.

I became aware of social work when I was an undergraduate student here at the University of Toronto. I was taking child psychology. I was considering going into Deaconess work but the year I was graduating there was an advertisement and it had a description of what social work was. I thought "how interesting". I went to our church which was downtown and one of the staff members was a social worker slash Deaconess. I saw a person who had tremendous capacities to help people and I had been encouraged to work at a daycare center. And this provided an excellent opportunity for me to apply my child psychology to working with children. So that's kind of the way which I became interested in social work.

I went into the Faculty of social work from the position of an untrained social worker. I had been employed for at least six years if not longer, from the mental health setting for emotionally disturbed children to the child welfare. There was a tremendous impetus to enable untrained workers to go into the Faculty of social work to get their training. I found the faculty to be friendly, caring, very interested in me as a learner. And very interested in my background experiences in child welfare as well as working in a clinic



as a member of a team with psychiatrists and psychologists, a public health nurse and myself. So they began to integrate that in the courses that they were teaching too; so I felt as though I was kind of a member of the team. As a student I was at ease. We were buddies in learning.

To me being a social worker means that I derive a tremendous amount of satisfaction in seeing people, regardless of their ages, being able to think about the changes they want to bring about in their lives, the direction they want to go, whether it is problem solving, whether it's related to family conflict, whether it's related to negativity in their environment, specifically in relation to education that they can achieve it. That brings to me a tremendous amount of satisfaction.

The principles of social work. You start where the client is. You're nonjudgmental, you're respectful and you proceed in the time that the individual has. You're constantly with your client. You're not in the position of saying "this is what you should do, that's what you should do". No. you're making inquiries, you're enabling them when they have some difficulties "what happened? Has this affected you? what way has it affected you?" It's just marvelous to work it out with them.

In terms of social work education, it provides a tremendous amount of knowledge and skills to be able to enter into almost any door. And it provides us with an opportunity to recognize ourselves, know ourselves, know how we learn and how much more we can learn in the process of providing service, whether it's at the direct level of service in the community, the organizational leveler or whether it's at the teaching level, just provides tremendous amount of strength if you will.

Upon retiring, then the whole world just opened up; Just so many opportunities out there. In terms of my volunteer capacity it has provided opportunities for policy formation, writing papers on policy, being in Ottawa, being on the member the CARC, being out West at different conferences presenting papers and so on. In terms of the development of programs, now is a volunteer I sowed the seed and it became an organization, specifically a program in which volunteers are invited to go into schools to help children who've got learning problems. These volunteers were all older persons and so we had over two hundred people who were sixty-five years of age and over going into schools to help children to read and to write. The focus was upon the children now the focus is on the elderly. [laughs] The benefits that this produced for those who are living by themselves in an apartment or in their the house who had a lot to contribute but didn't know they had it, and it provided them with just a wonderful opportunity to get out and be able to contribute.



I was the first chair of the education committee for seniors and from that has developed an educational program for seniors at the seniors active living centre. First of all I did a bit of research to find out what people would be interested in, what were they wanting to learn, what was they want to know as older persons. Then I just commenced to get some people to come in and speak with them about the topics they were interested in. Most of them were on medications and so they wanted to know more about that. Spirituality and aging. I can remember very distinctly some of them wanting to focus on different religions and so I developed a course on comparative religions and they were so taken by it that they wanted so-and-so to come back the second time and the third time to speak on it, and I was very happy about that expansion of themselves, to think more largely and without discrimination.

It was very meaningful as a volunteer to be a representative in the formation of a seniors network in Atlantic Canada, to see where each of the provinces were and what could be developed for seniors in relation to each of the provinces. I functioned as a research consultant for several projects. There were a lot of papers that were written and probably are just shelved; But very, very good recommendations. You can have the policy you see, you can have the recommendations and that's wonderful and you can feel so good about being a part of that, but the real challenge is in getting something done and that takes a tremendous amount of collaboration and understanding.

It's the politics, that's the most challenging thing; the politics that goes into making decisions. I've been on a national board in relation to elder abuse and on poverty. The poverty level is just incredible. And oh, the politics that gets into it. But fortunately where I live you can touch the premier pretty regularly in meetings, but he's a politician. he listens, shows a great deal of interest, then gets back to his office, well other things that have to be answered before this. I introduced the first seniors commission for a political party. It appealed to a significant number of seniors. There was the recognition, at least at a political level, that seniors need to be represented and need to have a vehicle by which they could be heard, and that was the objective.

Considering I've been in social work since 1952 as a practitioner, as a supervisor, as a director, as an educator, what have I learned? Well, there's a tremendous amount to be learning from the valued experiences that we have. It's a continual learning experience; it never closes. The last thirteen years I had blessed opportunities of teaching undergraduate students. I'd been teaching graduate students but I had not taught undergraduate students. And to see them being able to identify their goals, know what they were really interested in and the direction they wanted to go and to see them move



towards those goals, thinking it out and feeling it out and to be able to reflect upon it was just marvelous.

So if people who are looking at social work, if they have the opportunities to spend a summer working in a social work setting in which they can get some semblance of how social worker is practiced, that would be excellent. Go and talk with somebody at a Faculty of social work and get some ideas of what is required in a social work program currently; what the expectations are, what the costs are, things of this sort. But have a relationship with somebody in the Faculty to find out you know they're really pretty human people. There's not somebody to fear.

I have so many commendations that are made of me but I don't register them. Just so much to be done and so much to be learned. Once a social worker always a social worker.

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