

Profiles in Social Work

Episode 35 – Rashaad Vahed

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 – Rashaad Vahed

My name is Rashaad Vahed and I graduated from the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 1998.

I was actually a science student and was doing all kinds of volunteer work with poor families, with at-risk youth, community development and when I came to the end of my science degree one of my friends passed me a social work application and she said "you know, I don't know if you realize what you find interesting, but it's called social work". She was actually in this program at the time and I applied and that was my entrance into social work.

The program for me, there was a lot of learning, a lot of pressure, but we had a considerable amount of fun. Both sides of that stick out for me: both being stressed out but having a lot of fun. Throughout the process I had very good faculty, really strong clinical educators who had done clinical work themselves and then I moved into a practicum which was even more challenging. I was really blessed in my practicum experience because I had my field instructor and I had a whole team of people who were really invested in our education. It was a strong environment but it could also be a competitive environment. It was the real introduction for me of sitting very closely with people, across a small room or in a living room and really having that experience where



people approach us with so much hopefulness, so much courage, looking for solutions, looking for some kind of resource or guidance. What stood out for me was an experience of “this is real. I’m not watching television. This is real and what I say means something for the people who are in front of me”. Empathy: getting so close to them that you can actually understand as much as you can where they’re coming from. Joining them where they’re at and using that as the basis for exploring some of the theory, looking at “where has this family been in the past? How did they get here to Canada? Have they always been here? What’s happened in this family in particular that got them to this point in their lives or this particular problem?” And then being able to navigate “what do I bring to this situation that’s different from what the family has, and how can we own it together? And how can we own it in a way that they could take a part of it home and move forward from this place so that they re-establish their normal trajectory in life and get things back to the way it used to be for them?” That really birthed a moment of seriousness and put me on a trajectory of getting very interested in doing this work better.

So right now I’m a regional clinical supervisor in the Office of the Children’s Lawyer. We provide custody and access assessments for families who are before the court who are going through a divorce. Really we are working with families on behalf of children. We are providing social work within the umbrella of a legal practice. How the kids come to us is actually through the parents. The parents are able to sit back at some level and say “how this is working isn’t working” and they are able to, before the court system, approach a judge and say “we’d like the Office of the Children’s Lawyer to come in and conduct this assessment for us”. It’s an incredible moment because you are allowing people into your life and you’re allowing people to really observe you and make statements about you that are going to be documented publicly. At the kernel of that is the life of the child. We want to know how is this young person, how is this infant getting through their day to day life? How are their basic needs being met? How do they get to see parents and grandparents and other people that might be important in their life and where is the enrichment that allows them to build relationships with all family members?

What we do know about this work is that when families go through this stage of separating and divorce is that there is incredible stress and for a period of time the family can get very unbalanced, really stretched in terms of their resources; and the kids need somebody who can come and just focus on them. Infuse their voice back in this process so that the adults and the legal system can see who they are, what it is they are asking for. As kids get a little bit older a key issue could be how much time they spend with one parent or the other, who takes them for their activities. You enter into your



teenage years and as much as your parents might be essential in your life and extremely cool, what happens is that your friends become more central and more cool and so agreements made early, five, six, seven, eight years of age are now frozen in time and you've got a teenager who wants to be with one parent, perhaps wants to be with both parents, but now has to compete with "do I spend time with mom or dad, or with my friends?" At this stage of their life being an individual is as important as being interconnected, is as important as being connected to family and friends. How do we take all of these different elements and pull it together in a way that still preserves relationships with parents and grandparents but at the same time is conscious of where the child is at that moment in their life.

It's such a difficult time. Parents that initially came together with the idea of building one family and one dream are beginning to disentangle from each other, and as they step back from each other, it becomes "whose idea is more important? Whose idea will really guide the life of this child?" We end up having equally passionate parents who are very committed to their point of view and it is emotionally charged. This is the living environment for the child. We collect important information from medical doctors, child protection services, police services. A social worker, they would go out and really meet with each parent. We want to understand where it is they come from. We want to understand "what are the key issues? What is their idea about what would work for the child? What is their parenting plan for their child?" Meeting with the parents with the children and really observing that interactive moment between the parents or grandparents, sometimes even aunts and uncles, with the child and looking for key developmental pieces. "How does emotion flow back and forth? How do they make it through difficult spots when kids don't want to come for dinner, eat their dinner, turn off the television? Normal moments in a family's life; and we'll observe the parent-child interaction. And then we'll really begin to pull together all of that legal information and all of the collateral information. We pull that information together, we return to the parents and we say "This is what we have. This is what we've observed. What are your thoughts about this?" And usually by that point people also begin to reconnect to what their hopes and goals were for their children and sometimes through the assessment people are able to really focus in on the child once again. They begin to take the perspective of the other parent, of the child, of other key people and they themselves will often turn around and say "you know what? I don't want to see this return to court this way. We can make our own suggestions as to how we would like to see this settle". They put pen to paper, often with lawyers, and agree on who will make decisions for the child, where their child will spend time together, what kind of extracurricular activities they'll have. At that point, once they settle, it ends the court's involvement. Sometimes it arrives at a



report which is really reflective of where people are coming from, where the child is coming from, and that information gets put back to the court system so that a judge can use that information and make the best possible decision in the best interests of the child.

For those of us who are parents, there is no more vulnerable moment than when we feel our children are suffering. We are brought to our knees. What's challenging is that every case begins from this moment of emotional intensity, oftentimes people feel personally wronged and feel perhaps guilt and shame for the fact that they couldn't hold their relationship together in the way that they might have wanted to. People are very invested in a particular outcome and they see you as somebody who's going to provide direction; and perhaps the secret hope is that the direction will be in the way that they view it. This fits very well with the social work skill set. We're trained to watch what is on the surface and what is really driving the agenda. We're looking for those moments where we can build connection, bridges, between people, between new ideas, ultimately to move people by helping them focus on "where is it that you'd like to see us get to at the end of this and how might that feel?"

This work has incredible precision. You need to know the theories that you work from and you need to be current with those theories because you will be asked about it, sometimes on the stand. Mistakes made are highly visible. They can be written about in judgements and you can be called on the carpet directly and named. So that really makes you up your game. "What am I doing at this time and why?"

I love to learn but I live to learn. The learning is enormous. I was quite arrogant when I started. I thought "I'm going to get family therapy in three years, I'm going to be done and I'm going to move on." Ten years later I'm still scratching the surface. Evidence informed practice really is changing the way that we do work. I'm conducting therapy now with a mindset of how we understand the brain to work and grow. The learning is endless and new and we have to change as a consequence of it. You end up finding entirely new domains of interest. Either different units of families but also different specific issues: mental health, substance use, trauma. All of this can arrive at our doorstep.

Being a social worker for me brought me very close to just how my personality functioned. I just really enjoy people. I enjoy that privilege of having people invite me into their lives. I'm directly informed by the people that I work with and I carry that experience into policy work, into the management work, into different structures whereby those people who I carry in my head might benefit. Our children thrive when



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they look at somebody and when they look at them their eyes light up. Whatever we can do to allow caregivers to have their eyes light up for their children once again, I believe that's a noble cause.

I have greatly benefitted from other social workers at every stage of my career who have opened their arms to me and helped me do the learning. I hope that if somebody is entering the social work field that they realize that they are entering into a group of people who seek to advance the way they work but seek to advance how they themselves work.

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