

Profiles in Social Work

Episode 39 – Gordon Cressy

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 – Gordon Cressy

My name is Gordon Cressy and I graduated from the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 1969.

When I was ending high school, I was working as a janitor in the school during March break. And I saw a little sign, 'plenty of work, no pay in the Caribbean'. That sounded like a pretty exciting adventure to me. I went and applied. It was pretty much like the Peace Corps. And I was accepted to go off to Trinidad in the West Indies. What started it was a one-day orientation for a two-year assignment. The person who was giving this orientation was a very well-known writer. And he asked each of us, "so why are you going?" So I said something like, "I'm going to help the people." He said, "if you're going to help the people forget it. If you're going to listen and learn, then you might be able to help the people." I did have two years in the Caribbean that were fantastic. I then went to the YMCA training school in Chicago for four years – south side of Chicago during the time of the race riots, a really profound experience. And then I came home. And the University of Toronto Social Work gave me the sense of your instincts are good, your passion is good, let's ground this in some real theory so that practice follows experience.



Well the late sixties was a time of profound social change. There was a whole movement around youth involvement and decision making, taking on the establishment. Community organizing was king. And what I remember best are a mixture of the students and two or three professors who actually had profound impact on me, and saw the big world, that really social work in the end was the field of action. I guess the line I've learned is: "get the inside outside before you go outside" - how you work with people to make things happen. My field placements were sensational. I was living in downtown Toronto on a residential street. And at that time one of the settlement houses wanted to move onto that residential street. A settlement house to me is the place where people can come, feel comfortable and have programs that reflect their needs. They're driven by a sense of social justice and fairness. The programs meet the needs of the local community. The local people opposed it. And it was suggested, since I was a local person, I should oppose this movement. Now turned out that settlement house was where I had my field placement. And so I went out one night with the community to oppose this settlement house moving. And I was brought in the next day to my supervisor who said, "what were you doing there last night?" I said, "I was just following good community organizational practice." And the issue really was you work for our organization, you are loyal to our organization. Where you live is something different. And it was one of those moments in time where you sort of question where do the values all sit. I, in the end I was proud of what I did. And out of that I had a field work extension. I didn't graduate with my fellow students in June. I had to wait 'til December. That settlement house is in the residential street. I've served on its board of directors. And so staying the course is another piece to me of social work. You never forget where you start.

My first job was running a halfway house for kids in trouble with the law. I had eight young people who lived in a house that I lived in. This was an alternative to going to youth training school, institutional. It was live in the community and try and adapt to the community. It was in the days when you worked six and a half days a week. My job was to adapt the kids to the school system. And the more I spent time on that I realized that part of the problem was the school system itself. So that led me to run for politics. Yes you can change and affect eight kids, but if you can affect the whole system, now that's really powerful.

The United Way - it's an organization in North America that raises money for lots of charities at the same time. When I went there to become their president, the first thing I looked at was the board of directors. They were all white. My experiences in the Caribbean and in Chicago led me to believe that a community organization should



reflect the community. A group of people came together on the board of directors who were the nominating committee. I said, "how did you all arrive at the same time?" We all live on the same street in Rosedale, which is a very wealthy neighborhood, good people, well motivated people, who would nominate their friends because they did not know the wider community. And they said to me, "Gordon, you do. Go and reach out." And I actually did go to a leader in the Chinese community and I said, "come on the board of United Way." He said, "if you're interested, bring your board chair, bring your campaign chair. We will have a meeting in our community. It will be in Cantonese. We will provide translators. And your board will know how we feel." And I remember our chair, he said, "well, that's really not how you recruit people." I said, "you have to go out to bring people in." A profound principle in social work: start where people are at. If you look at the United Way today, it's a very diverse group of people. You found ways of comfort to bring people in, and then the leadership changed. This friend in the Chinese community, came on the board, went on the executive committee, became the chair of the board. So not only did they get to the table but they got to the head table. I don't know that I would've thought through that had I not had my experiences in social work.

Part of the challenge is accepting who you are at a certain point of time. The other thing is you can grow but part of who you are stays forever. I did my thesis on the indigenous person, the local person, as the caregiver rather than the professional. It was kind of an interesting thesis. My professor wrote in my paper: B minus. He said, "you tell a great story but the paper is lacking in intellectual rigor." Thirty odd years later, I was teaching here. And now what of course has happened is students evaluate you. And one year one of the students wrote at the end, "you tell great stories but the course is lacking in intellectual rigor." And I sort of thought on that and reflected on it, and I thought, "so you're a good storyteller. That's a great thing. Intellectual rigor? Maybe you won't ever have." Partly figuring out who you are and what you can do is the most important thing. Insight into yourself, which I think comes out of social work is, figure out what you can do, figure out what needs to be done, and then figure out who can get that done. Doesn't have to be you. We all need a strong ego but we do not have to be the star.

The great rewards in the end are seeing things happen. Having run the Nelson Mandela fund and met Nelson Mandela two or three times, those are moments in time. There are few heroes of that kind of dimension. To have gone off with my wife for three years to a little island in the West Indies and worked with the community to build a YMCA. And to go back from time to time and see kids swimming in the pool, that's the kind of special stuff. To be able to tell personal stories about a brother who actually took his life and another brother who has schizophrenia, something I wouldn't have done. Social work



allowed me to do that, and to do that in public speaking and then always have three or four people come up and say “you know what you did...” Everybody has a story. To me as one who's always rooted for the underdog and then gone out and done something about it, uhh, that to me is a pretty good feeling.

Being a social worker is operating always in the field of action and working really hard to make a difference with others – individual, local, community wide, it can be global. But it is willing to stand up and be counted for that which is important - in your job but as much it's in your lifestyle, as a volunteer, as a family member. You've taken an oath in a way to me when you're a social worker saying, “I'm in this game to make a difference and I'm going to go hard to do that.” It's not for everyone and it shouldn't be for everyone. You can do good or you can do well. Those are very different concepts. When you do well, later in life as a volunteer you can do good. But if you do good all your life, you will never do really well. A judgement of social work is you're never gonna be really financially wealthy, but you're gonna do just fine. How will I measure success? Is it of the soul? Is it of the head? Is it how you live? Is it more cars? And all that kind of stuff. A lot have that motivation - I care deeply. It has to be a bit about “this is who I am”.

There comes a point in one's life that you have to be ready to share of yourself too. We all have problems. We all have struggles. We share them with each other. I run off positive energy. It doesn't mean I don't go down sometimes. And when you go down it's important to have some other people around you who can bring you back up. At a personal level there are always people who make a difference. And I guess the circle of that is don't forget those people. Where you start, don't forget who you started with and keep in touch with them the whole way. At the University of Toronto I worked for two well-known presidents. I was out of the country for three years. When I came back I understood and heard that he slipped into the start of Alzheimer's. He now lives in a little room, in effect, a locked ward. I go to see him every week. He doesn't know who I am. I am the better for visiting. He may not know I'm there but I know I'm there. The good guys, it's important to keep in touch wherever they are. It's easy to surround at the good times. A social worker surrounds people at the tough times and it is personal.

If you connect with people and you share stories that they can say, “ooh, that makes me think” that's a powerful way to learn, I absolutely believe that.



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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