

Profiles in Social Work

Episode 02 – Cheryl Mitri

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 – Cheryl Mitri

Hello, my name is Cheryl Mitri and I graduated from the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 2006.

What jumps out at me being here at the Faculty is being exposed to social work in the broad sense. I really liked my first year of the two year program because it gave me access to actually the micro, mezzo, and macro approaches to social work. Another thing are my placements. It was so integral in my learning because I got to see where theory fit with practice and where theory didn't fit so neatly with practice. Previously I was a high-school dropout and a single mom and teenage mom and I returned to highschool when my child was a few years old. I saw and I experienced how my life had completely changed through gaining an education. With that awareness, experiencing my own empowerment through education, it just naturally led me to social work to want to continue that and give that back to people that have had similar experiences. My two placements were in education and were about ultimately, giving students the tools that they need to be able to navigate through school.

As a professional my commitment really lies in empowering students who have been disengaged for one reason or another, be systemically, familial, from education and empower them so that they can take control over their own lives and live holistic,

meaningful lives. Though I work at a local college in a wonderful one general year arts and science certificate program that's offered to really all students but in my program we work with those students who have been disengaged. So we, for the first term, work with those students to provide them with the skills that they need to move forward and pursue further education.

I am not only a Faculty member, but I am also a counsellor, and I see the need for both in education. So I really see the intersect between education and social work. Each student that I work with, have their own story and are very unique. I work with a mosaic of students, that come from a multitude of backgrounds, be it ethnic, culturally, I have students that live with certain mental health challenges, learning challenges, students who have lived in 10 different foster care homes, have lived with addictions, have come from families, that unfortunately for one reason or another haven't supported them or haven't introduced education to them or immigrant families that just are not familiar with this system so they couldn't support their children through it. So my classroom is a very interesting classroom.

One course that I teach is a personal management course. Students that have been pushed out of education have been out of education for many, many years. So they need to learn how to be students again. Goal setting, taking care of oneself, be it health and wellness, and exercise, finances, budgeting, self-esteem, positive communication, things like that. We've developed a curriculum with this class that provides students with the skills of how to navigate through college. And even if it's just providing them with the language of what college is. Students who haven't been to college, or who have never been exposed to the idea of being at college, don't even know what a certificate program is, what the word diploma means, what syllabus means. So it's breaking it down for them, in a way that they can understand it.

We also counsel, mentor and advise our students. My office hours aren't between 12 and 2. My office hours are when I'm not in meetings, and I'm not in the classroom. And they need that. Cause they need that constant encouragement. So students will run to me and say "I got an A in my English!" and they're so happy they need someone to be there, to also be happy with them. We're not only instructors in the classroom, that's where social work principles and values come into play. Counselling is not only sitting two chairs side by side. Counselling could be just me walking down the halls, seeing a student, and saying "hey, where are you going, how was class today?" that informal piece. So that's part of my counselling. My counselling is also in the office, and kind of problem solving. "You didn't do well on your math test. That's ok, what can we do now, what can we do about it? Find a way that works for you, to get you through what you

need to get through". And I can always refer them if I can't help, to other services. It really is developing that relationship and that is part of counselling.

I need to be my authentic self with my students, and if I'm not my authentic self with them, they will pick it up just like that and you're starting off somewhere where change will be a little more difficult to make.

Social Work to me is the most beautiful profession on the face of this earth. It exposes me to the humanness of people. I am exposed to people's stories. I am exposed to people's experiences. I am let into people's lives. It gives me goose bumps to think about it. And they allow me to be part of that life, and they allow me to part of some change that they want to make in their life. Whatever change that is for them. How beautiful is that?

I encourage students that are considering social work to do their homework. Ask themselves questions, what is social work, what does social work mean to them? How do they see social work, and where do they see themselves in this profession? To be reflective, and make informed decisions when it comes to their education and their career path. I see social work being relevant to other professions, to medicine, to business, the corporate world, because the skill sets you receive in social work are so transferable. Interpersonal skills, communication skills, teamwork, group work. Getting a degree in social work opens up so many doors that people don't even realize; you can work in education, you can work in hospitals, you can work in grass-root agencies, you could work for the government. There are so many opportunities. You can take on what is perceived to be a non-social work job, as a social worker, because social work gives you those magical skills!

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