

MY JOURNEY INTO SOCIAL WORK

I am a proud social worker. My choice to go into the field was quite intentional. Helping fellow human beings was something that always meant a lot to me. I have a very clear recollection of witnessing another classmate with Downs Syndrome who was being "main-streamed" as they called it at the time, dropping her tray of food in the school cafeteria while others watched and laughed. I got out of my seat where I was sitting with a group of friends and helped to pick her lunch items off the floor, toss them, and get her a new lunch. My best friend in high school was gay. He was kind, funny and mostly bullied, regularly being called the "f" word by our classmates. He and I were voted "Done Most for Class" our senior year. As an adult he went on to contract and die from AIDS, but not before he founded the Hyacinth Foundation, one of the best known and most important AIDS related non-profits that has done so much great advocacy around AIDS and gay rights issues in New Jersey and beyond. In the last few years of his life he took the AIDS quilt to Israel and brought great attention worldwide to the AIDS epidemic in the 1980's. I, along with his other close friends and family members took shifts at his bedside in his final days so he would not die alone.

I have always chosen to associate with like-minded people who see great value in advocating for human rights issues and I believe that it is our responsibility to work on behalf of others and believe that when we do good for others, we are doing good for society as a whole. I don't know if my interest in issues of discrimination and the need to speak out against racism and intolerance was routed in my upbringing. I was raised by a mother who had immigrant parents and had shared stories with me and my sisters of how others would call her ethnic slurs when she was a child because she spoke with a slightly detectable accent and her parents did not speak English. I am sure that hearing those stories had an impact. My mother went on to graduate first in her class and enjoyed a highly successful career at a time when having a working mother was not the norm. During her older years, she struggled quite painfully with depression, something that contributed to her untimely passing. Looking back, I realize just how lucky I was to have such a courageous mother, who achieved so much while having endured so much pain and adversity and at a time when it was particularly challenging for women to take leadership roles in the workplace. I think this influenced how deeply disturbing and horrific I find crimes of hate to be, those that have taken place historically and continue today, most recently highlighted by the hate crimes against Asian Americans.

I think my upbringing and early life experiences helped to shape my value system and inform my career choice. The core values of the social work profession, which include Service, Social Justice, Dignity and Worth of the Person and the Importance of Human Relationships, resonate deeply with me. It has provided great personal and professional satisfaction to have started out in my career doing direct service and then earned an MSW, became a licensed social worker and now I feel fortunate to work in my chosen field at Alternatives. Nothing is more meaningful to me than to see the accomplishments of the individuals we serve, most of whom come to those achievements against great odds. I believe it is a highly undervalued, yet a very noble profession. Despite the challenges and frustrations that working in this field can bring, the sense of fulfillment that can be achieved through life changing and meaningful action keeps me connected to the core values and passion that drew me to the field in the beginning. Everything I do to this day is for my high school classmate, for my friend Jack, for my Mom and for every person who has been marginalized, bullied, mocked or has been subjected to any words or acts of hatred or violence due to their disability, gender identity, ethnicity, race, religion or belief system or simply because they are perceived to be “different”. I fought against such bigotry and intolerance then and I do so now, as a social worker, and as a human being. There is a statement on the NASW website that reads: “social workers belong to a profession that does not tolerate social workers who practice, condone, facilitate or collaborate with any form of discrimination or racism.... We belong to a profession that requires us to be culturally aware and competent. We are expected to obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity, race, racism and oppression. This is the meaning of the profession.” As I said at the start of this article, I am a very proud social worker. In terms of career choice, I would not change a thing and would have it no other way.

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