REFLECTIONS:

NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING

Volume 6, Number 3 **Summer 2000**

A Journal for the Helping Professions

REFLECTIONS:
NARRATIVES OF PROFESSIONAL HELPING

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What I Learned on my Sabbatical

By Mary Ann Jimenez, Ph.D.

I return from a seven-month sabbatical this month, reflecting on the unrecognized privileges we in academia and the helping professions enjoy that many do not. I spent time in several cities engaged in research, enjoying the privilege of fresh perspective, windows on different lifestyles, new professional acquaintances, and renewal of old family and friendship ties that travel allows. I was following my own research idea through libraries and document collections, speaking at length with experts in the field I had chosen to investigate. My days were my own as were my thoughts and virtually all my choices. Waiting at home was the life I had temporarily exited as I sought the opportunity to refresh myself as a scholar and traveler.

Even though I believe that my time away from the University will deepen my teaching and result in a contribution to social work, I frequently was reminded of my privileged life as a professional academic during encounters in various urban areas with poverty and suffering. Floating through economically depressed areas, I took in the curious stares of passersby with the relaxed, unfazed attitude that comes with the privilege of moving through the tribulations of others without having to account for oneself or stop to intervene.

I realized how few people who stood grimly on the morning subways of the metropolitan centers had control over the most essential matters of their lives - their economic status, the discrimination they experienced, the health problems for which no one offered a solution. Many of the people I spoke with worked in low paying jobs, and shared with those who were unemployed a sense of bleakness and hopelessness; a striking and painful counterpoint to the surge of energy I was experiencing in my recreated state of freedom. The privilege of sustained thought about matters not related to daily existence is one many of us have enjoyed in our professional education and lives; most others have not been afforded this. The time to follow through with a creative idea is a gift accorded those who have privileges tied to wealth, education or professional status.

Over the course of my sabbatical, I was struck not by the shared nature of human struggle, but by the differences between my life and those of many others. Many helping professionals and virtually all academics share the privileges that I experienced. This separates us ineluctably from those we wish to help, teach or treat. For social workers, in particular the gulf is wide - working with oppressed, marginalized groups means working with those who have few if any of these unearned, unrecognized privileges. How can we understand, through standpoint theory or any other means, the lived life of many of our clients? Do we need to understand to make a difference? In her moving narrative *"At Home with Poor Women and Children: My Sabbatical at Bethany House,"* Jennifer Soule recounts how she reconnected with the lives of her clients as well as her own background on her sabbatical, a very different one from mine. She was able to overcome these differences by living with poor women.

After reading the pieces in the *"Violence and Children"* section of this issue, I was struck by how far my life has always been from the experiences these adolescents have already have lived through. On the other hand, like Cynthia Cannon Poindexter in *"Honoring our dead by breaking silence: Remembering those who died from AIDS,"* many of our lives have been deeply touched by AIDS. Yet even as we supported and loved our friends and family during terrible times, I doubt that any witness, no matter how close, could understand the lived experience of suffering and dying from AIDS.

What I learned from my sabbatical is that many privileges separate me from others, and that this distance is far greater than the essential human isolation that makes it impossible to fully understand another's experience. Any idea that a bridge to others can be created out of empathy alone is an illusion created to make us feel better, less guilty and more useful. Recognizing the fundamental differences between our lives and the lives of others, including many of our clients, as well as understanding that a great deal of this difference is due to inequality and discrimination, seem necessary pre-conditions for any connection. The rest is very hard and humbling work. ❑

Special Section on Violence
Editorial

By Julie O'Donnell, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Social Work, California State University, Long Beach

A Reflections Special Edition on Violence was planned in the wake of the Columbine tragedy and the hate shootings on the Jewish preschool children and teachers in California. Many in the country and the media were once again focused on and fearful of the causes and outcomes of violence. Since helping professionals are often faced with issues of violence, possibly in their own lives, and, often in the course of their work, we believed a special edition on violence was quite timely and would provide important insights for us all.

While Columbine and many of the other recent youth killings in schools raise many issues, one concern that speaks strongly to me is the apparent and woeful lack of understanding of the "real lives" of our youth on the part of the people who spend so much time with them—their parents and educators. My work in some of our low-income and violence-prone communities has taught me the incredible strength and resiliency of children and families who struggle with these interconnected problems on a daily basis, yet rise successfully above them. At the same time, I am often surprised at how little professionals who work in yet live outside these communities seem to understand what happens in the lives of our children. I can vividly recall the student teacher in tears and struggling with the reality that all but two of the children in her kindergarten class had had someone close to them die—"that never happened in my school." I remember the school social work student righteously denouncing the parents she was working with who told their child to hit other kids when they were bothered being interrupted by another student who had grown up in South Central Los Angeles. The second student talked about her moral dilemma in teaching kids not to fight back, since she knew that in her neighborhood the only way for the gangs to leave you alone was to "take a baseball bat to someone's head." I can still see the child protective services administrator who was against out-stationing his staff at a local middle school because the neighborhood was too dangerous—yet the children they served faced these dangers daily.

I thought it important to ask the youth themselves how they experienced and perceived violence. The call went out to over 50 schools; one class of students answered. Their vignettes tell compelling stories about the lives of our youth. I hope we can learn from these as well as take the time to learn the stories of other youth whose lives we touch.

To some extent, my concerns regarding the "gap" between the lives of professionals and those with whom we work are strongly echoed in the articles written by Molidar and Maes and Farrar. The Molidar and Maes article describes the personal struggles experienced by a social work professor and social work students as they are blatantly confronted by on their abilities and knowledge by an ex-gang member who has come to class to talk about working with gang members and street youth. This article highlights the importance of teaching helping professionals to <u>learn</u> from their "clients" and of the imperative to <u>establish</u>

rather than assume credibility with each and every person regardless of the number of letters behind our names. These themes should resonate with anyone who has had the experience of working with alienated youth or diverse populations. The article by Farrar grippingly describes a conversation in which a high school student tells his teacher about how he has killed two people while she grades his essay. While the student, often angrily, unburdens himself, the teacher is "stunned by killer/child sitting before her," and possibly by how little she knew of him prior to their discussion.

Cocinis's article, "A Time to Kill," powerfully evokes the ethical and moral struggles facing social workers researching and writing mitigating circumstance reports for inmates facing the death penalty. While I had never heard of this type of social work practice prior to this narrative, the institutional racism in our justice system as well as the large number of death row convictions that have recently been overturned or put under review underscore the importance of working for justice even the most violent in our society. The Juarez article traces his involvement in violence prevention activities at both the individual and societal level. His narrative describes the terrible pain experienced by people who have lost their loved ones to homicide, and how his empathy and efforts led to the creation of agencies and coalitions dedicated to reducing violence. Both articles contribute to our understanding of how personal histories and commitment to social justice may lead helping professionals to work in violence-related areas, regardless of the mixed emotions and challenges involved.

As I read these articles and ponder the violence I sometimes see in the communities where I work, I also look into the face of my innocent and beloved ten-month old son. I pray that he will never be the victim or perpetrator of such violence and am grateful that so many of us are willing to give so much of ourselves to reduce violence in our society. ❑

CALL FOR NARRATIVES

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NARRATIVES OF PROFESSIONAL HELPING

Reflections, a refereed quarterly journal published by the Department of Social Work at California State University, Long Beach, is currently seeking professional narratives. Please send us papers that describe:

- Your professional practice
- The process of research
- Experiences in teaching
- Signal events that have transformed your professional thinking or life

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A Space Between the Beads

By Kimberly K. Farrar

In the essay A Space Between the Beads by Kimberly K Farrar, a New York City high school teacher has a conversation with an ex-Latin Kings member who defies stereotyping. She offers to listen to his story with the hope that "it would do him some good," and is then filled with conflicting emotions herself. Ultimately, she is left stunned by the dichotomy of killer/child sitting before her.

The students were attending an assembly and I was alone in my room when Junior* came by with a rewrite of his essay. He wanted me to grade it right then. The topic was to describe a favorite object, one of my standard lessons, and he'd chosen to write about a necklace given to him by his older brother. It was a strand of gold and black beads that had been passed to his brother by Lord Tito, a high-ranking leader of the notorious gang The Latin Kings. There was a section in the initial draft of Junior's essay that wasn't clear to me, something about marking the beads after a member dies. He pulled out a purple velvet pouch, the type of purse that looks as though it once held a valuable coin, and unfurled the necklace as if it were a rosary.

He showed me a space between the beads where the string had been marked with a black pen. "You see? That's for a member who died. There's another one, and this space is for me."

There was a small bit of exposed string waiting for the black line of Junior's death. I wondered about how a life could be reduced to a black mark. His essay explained that the beads were protective and blessed. After Lord Tito had given the necklace to Junior's brother, Lord Tito was found murdered. Junior emphasized that this had convinced his brother of the beads' power. The morning after his brother had passed on the strand to him, his brother was found murdered.

"Don't give those beads away," I joked.

"You have to, every ten years, or they don't work for you."

*all names are pseudonyms

I pulled out my red pen to correct and grade his essay. Junior, a heavy kid who wore pressed blue jeans and striped oxford shirts, sat across from me in the small schoolroom chair, leaning forward like an anxious child. His lips were stretched thin across his broad face as he awaited my final grade. I made a few grammatical corrections, complimented him on clearing up the vague section about marking the strand, and gave it a 90. Maybe it should have been an 85, but I sensed the importance of the essay to him. Junior was one of my brightest students. The precise, well-constructed letters of his printing reflected a disciplined mind. He had had a four-year scholarship to one of the finest private high schools in New York until midway through the eleventh grade when he was arrested and the scholarship was rescinded. Now he was nineteen years old and trying to graduate from the evening program at the Young Adult Learning Program, a last chance, last hope kind of place.

I was curious about the beads, about Junior, so I asked a benign question about the alternating pattern of the beads, five black, then five gold. He explained that the memorial marks on the strand have to go where the gold and black beads meet.

"There are 360 beads for the original 360 laws of discipline," he said, as if everyone knew about the 360 laws of discipline. "The necklace represents the 360 degrees of the completed circle." This I understood. It seemed philosophical, even New Age compared to what was to follow.

"You know, I've wondered what happened with you, Junior. How a kid with a full scholarship to a private school ended up," I looked around at the crumbling ceiling and empty bookshelf, "here."

"I did real good at my old school. Nobody bothered me and I didn't bother nobody, but the Feds had already been following me two years when I was there."

He wanted to talk and I didn't want to go to the pointless assembly, so I put down my folder, thinking that maybe listening to him would do him some good.

When the Feds arrested him, there was one document that charged 137 gang members under the racketeering and organized crime laws. Junior told the DA that he was going to fight it because he knew that a good lawyer could dismantle a federal case. So his girlfriend's family mortgaged their home and his father emptied his savings account to scrounge up the $75,000 needed to get Junior out of jail to await trial.

"So the DA calls me one day and they send two marshals out to my house to take me downtown. There's one thing I got to say about the Feds: they treat you with the utmost respect. It's Mr. Sanchero this and Mr. Sanchero that. Not like these dog city cops. They had the best food, too. Before they questioned me, I ate three big sandwiches. Hero sandwiches. You gotta understand, I was on house arrest for three months. It was the first time I'd stepped foot out of the house."

They wanted Junior to give testimony against his leader in exchange for leniency, but Junior swore he wasn't going to snitch. Then the DA carted out the 16 folders of testimony from his 16 compadres in the gang, and his stomach turned. "I literally felt sick after reading the first four," Junior said, gripping his stomach.

"It's like a tribe," he explained. "There's five guys in charge of each borough, and under them there's another group that runs the streets. That was me. I reported directly to the heads. I wasn't going to say nothing, no way. I'm no snitch. These were my people." In a gesture of loyalty, he pounded his heart with his fist.

His eyes filled with tears. As if those "traitors" were in the room, he erupted, "You didn't have a coat and I gave you a coat. When your baby was hungry, I put food in your baby's mouth. And now you're going to snitch me out?" His face turned red and his eyes almost closed. "It hurt me. I did everything for these guys. So I saw what these bastards, excuse me, were going to do and I told the DA 'all right.' It wasn't

about honor anymore. It was about saving your own." It reminded me of how animals will turn on their own kind when threatened.

They had followed him for two and a half years. He had an uncle on the police force who betrayed him. Disloyalty to the family was one crime Junior could not comprehend.

"I told him, 'You're family. You're supposed to protect me.' He went on about how I knew what I was doing was wrong. But he was family."

His words, *protect me*, rang in my ears. He was just a kid at the time, sixteen years old, fourteen when he was initiated.

Junior thrust his pointed finger forward as if his uncle's face were right in front of him, "You ain't family, man, you are a traitor." Then he took a breath, "No one in my family speaks to him anymore. Not even my father."

When Junior was sixteen, he had two hundred "soldiers" at his beck and call. "That's power," he said with pride. "Corrupt power, but still power." In a different life he would have been class president.

His leader had sent him to Harlem to shoot a guy who had tried to rape a Hispanic woman. Junior explained that "jobs" were always done by members from a different borough to keep the cops off the trail. I wondered how he knew whom to kill, how he tracked down the would-be rapist. I remembered my old student, Tyrone, from years ago at a different alternative school. He was found chopped up in a garbage can and the police were certain it was a case of mistaken identity. Tyrone was one of my favorite students, quiet and sweet, and I always allowed him to sit alone at the back of the room peacefully writing his own thoughts in his notebook. My memory of Tyrone's murder collided with the idea of Junior prowling Harlem to kill a man whom he had never seen before.

When Junior returned to Brooklyn from Harlem, he had to hand the leader the gun and tell in detail how it "went down." This was to ensure that they had their story straight if there were ever a trial. But I thought this ritual of recounting was more an act of hardening one's conscience. One of his leaders was an undercover FBI agent who had recorded Junior's entire recollection. Junior was quick to inform me that audio-tapes are not admissible as evidence in court. This was part of the reason he was never charged with the murder. He had a much clearer understanding of the intricacies of the law than I did. Junior had been confident that he would win his case with the help of a skilled lawyer. But after the DA displayed the cartons of evidence they'd collected against him, Junior reconsidered.

"For two and a half years, I sat in a two-by-four cell, twenty-three hours a day. One hour a day for exercise."

I found myself wondering if he had gained his weight in prison.

"I read *a lot*," he said and laughed. "But they don't reform you. You come out different, angrier. People don't understand. Somebody said I should see a psychiatrist."

"You should." I explained my own experiences with therapy. "It will help you deal with your feelings. You'll get your anger out. It's right under the surface anyway and you don't want it to get you in trouble again, you know what I mean?"

He explained that he was trying to "process" what I'd said and see if it applied to him. He came to the conclusion that it didn't. I knew he was right. My immediate problem was that I had no idea how to convince a person who had been in jail, who had murdered someone, to go sit on a leather couch and talk about his feelings. It seemed ridiculous to me, too.

Junior made a point of distinguishing the Latin Kings from the Bloods. He explained his disdain for the Bloods' initiation ritual of slashing an innocent bystander across the face as compared to the Kings who just "beat you in." He didn't want any Bloods in his neighborhood.

"I saw this one Blood around my way and I said, 'Take your red bandana off and get out of my neighborhood. If I ever see you again, I'm going to slit your throat ear to ear.' And then not even a week later this…this punk shows up again. You know what a straight edge is? It's one of those old shaving blades. I got a real nice one. It's

real sharp with a pearl handle." His eyes gleamed at the thought of its beauty.

"So I see this punk, right in my neighborhood again, and I told my man, 'Go to my house and get my straight edge, but take your time.' I wanted to talk with this guy. You know, draw it out." Draw it out? A dark-eyed, remorseless murderer was sitting across from me.

"So my man comes back about a half hour later and I flip it open…"

"Stop. I don't want to know," I said. "Don't tell me. I don't want to hear it."

"Okay. Let's just say I never saw him again after that and neither did anybody else."

There was Junior spilling over the tiny desk: smart, angry, young, and entirely capable of killing me. I thought about my daughter and my middle-class life. I wanted to be home at my dining room table, thumbing through the Eddie Bauer catalogue.

"I can't sleep at night for the things I've done," Junior said. " It's true. I lay awake all night sometimes. It's like my eyes can't shut."

He looked out the window at the darkening sky and continued, "You know what I want? It's not forgiveness. It's too late for forgiveness."

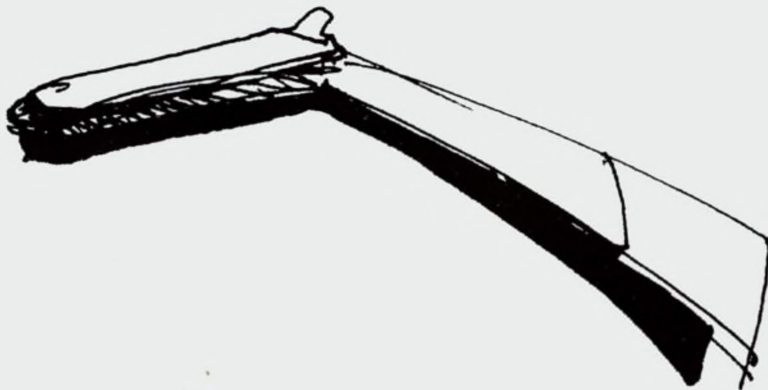
"Maybe too soon."

"No, it's too late. I go to church now. I found a way to God. In a way I wish I hadn't. But all I want is just a little bit of mercy," and he pinched his fingers together.

I wondered if he had offered any mercy to the man in Harlem or the punk in the bandana. Then I winced at my own eye-for-an-eye attitude.

"If I'm going to burn in hell for eternity, and I am, just a little mercy before I go. That's all I ask."

In front of me sat a murderer who understood his fate and a kid who wanted a good grade on his essay. The bored history teacher from across the hall came moseying into the room, plopped down and asked, "So what are we talking about?" I didn't know how to answer him. ❑



A Rose By Any Other Name

By Christian E. Molidor, Ph.D., Professor, Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver & Rose Maes

This narrative is a collaboration between two individuals. The first is a social work professor with 17 years' experience working with and/or teaching about troubled, violent teenagers. The other, Rose Maes, is a 27-year-old ex-gang member who has been involved in violence and drugs since she was eight, and is currently struggling to learn to live in "our" structured, ordered world, rather than the chaotic, violent world of gangs. This story focuses on the first time Rose was a guest speaker in an "Assessment and Interventions with Adolescents" *class, where she challenged the students and the professor to examine those two worlds. Through her presentation, Rose discovered that she has a voice, she belongs, and she makes a difference. In listening, the professor again became a student and re-learned a fundamental lesson.*

A colleague suggested I write a narrative reflecting my work with youth in gangs. That's a very challenging task. You see, reflective writing simply isn't my style. Research. That's how I was taught to write. Outline an abstract, write the literature review and a methodology section, summarize the results and implications, and then write a conclusion. Very procedure oriented—straightforward, organized; often quite dry. The problem is that common themes and experiences of gang membership—loyalty, respect, family, or power—are anything but dry, and never, absolutely never, straightforward, clear cut, or organized.

I started working with violent adolescents in an in-patient psychiatric hospital in 1982 and with gang members about five years later. The violence, or threat of violence, was always there, whether it be turned inward toward suicidal tendencies or outward in a murderous rage. During those years, I worked in an in-patient psychiatric hospital, ran after-care groups, and conducted family therapy. A university professor since 1992, I've designed training seminars and workshops on intervening with troubled youth, presented at numerous national conferences, and have been employed in the community. I've consulted and am currently a volunteer and member of the Denver Metro Gang Coalition. My work, research, and writing has always focused on troubled youth in some way (see Molidor, Tolman, & Koeber, 2000; Molidor & Potter, 1999; Molidor, 1997a; Molidor, 1997b; Molidor & Watkins, 1996). Seventeen years. It seems I got started a long time ago and only yesterday, both at the same time.

My struggle with this narrative then is in communicating in one single article the long journey of working with violent, troubled teenagers toward understanding their lives.

The solution, I've decided, is to allow you to listen to a dialogue. I'd like to introduce you, the reader, to a young woman who has been involved with gangs for almost as many years as I've been involved with youth. I'd like to share a lesson I learned from her as she spoke to my "Assessment and Interventions with Adolescents" class.

Rose is a 27-year-old Chicana. Since early childhood, she has been involved in gangs, drugs, alcohol, criminal delinquency, violence, and probably many elements of gang life that I've left out. She now volunteers for the Gang Rescue and Support Project (GRASP). GRASP is one of several programs that works specifically and directly with gang-involved youth in the Denver Metro area. Volunteers of GRASP, like Rose, do presentations in exchange for contribu-

tions to the organization. The money raised from these presentations goes into a fund that provides assistance to the families of those who lose their lives due to gang violence, and is used for burials and/or headstones.

Rose has long straight black hair, wears no make-up, and only goes out in baggy clothes (she says to make her look bigger and therefore less of a victim). She leaves the tattoos on her ankles uncovered for all to see.

A Rosey Presentation

I have to tell you up front that the first time I met Rose, I became totally and completely angry at her. A colleague had recommended her to speak to one of my classes focusing on work with gang-involved youth. This class happened to be made up of primarily young, White, social work students. Early in her presentation, Rose began telling the students that they probably wouldn't be able to understand her because they were White. She went on to say that she hated two things: White [people] and Red [the color of a rival gang]. She also said that wealthy college students couldn't really work with teenagers involved with gangs. You probably get the tone. The next hour and a half was filled with the common theme of how Whites could never understand youth of color involved with gangs. All the while, I was watching the faces of angry, shocked, and insulted graduate students. During the class I didn't give my own feelings much consideration. I didn't let her words in. When the class was over, the students just sat there. Questions? None? How could that be? Overall, the reaction, I think, was intimidation. Rose is small but powerful. I got up and beseeched the students to voice their questions and/or concerns, to take a chance and use this opportunity to explore the world Rose had lived in for so long. The students began slowly, tentatively—a small ripple. Rose's answers were frank, candid, and brutally honest. Soon, the students' questions and comments came much more quickly, like a dam had broken open.

It ended up being one of the best classes in which I've ever been involved. Still, as the hours passed after class, I found myself thinking more and more about the things Rose said. I got into an argument with her in my head. You must know that feeling. Someone, somewhere, says something insulting to you and you remain silent, or you kind of laugh it off, or even make some weak attempt at a comeback. Later though, you think of several sharp comebacks, that you desperately wish you had said at the time to set the person straight. If only you could go back and tell him or her. You can't, of course. But the thoughts stay there wrestling with you just the same.

What infuriated me the most was that I absolutely could not put my finger on what was making me so angry. Being accused of not being able to understand because of my color? Please. Work with gang kids for a year and count up how often *that's* thrown at you. The truth was I couldn't figure out anything specific that she said that made me angry. It was just there. I didn't know what it was, but the feeling left a terrible, bitter taste.

Of course, I finally figured out my response to her presentation. It came, as it usually does, at around three in the morning. I wish that I could tell you that it was a brilliant insight that will help us all change the world. It wasn't. It was actually quite simple, but a needed reminder. What was it? I'll tell you later. First read what Rose has to

say. To assist the reader in following the flow of the conversation between Rose, myself, and the students, I've put Rose's dialogue in italics.

Twenty-seven now, Rose articulates a complex, and at times contradicting, narrative of the ugliness, the power, and the strength of gang life, a description better than that of any academic, no matter how many years of practice experience. She sits on the table up front swinging her legs as she talks. She doesn't smile much. Included in her words, which I've taken from a transcript of the audio-taped presentation, are some of my own interpretations of what is being said.

Bullet Proof Rose

That's what she called herself in the presentation: bullet-proof Rose. As her words demonstrate, the name fits, but it doesn't.

Rose: I can't represent every female in gangs. I can't represent my age group. I can't represent anybody or do anything but tell you my story and try to pick apart the things that happened to me. I can tell you that if you think the issue is just gangs, you're mistaken. There's a collection of things that drive kids into gangs. It differs for every individual, but I guess that in some ways you could say I was the stereotypical gang girl in that I came from what you edumacated [sic] *people call a dysfunctional family. Ya'll will probably like that. The more education people get, the more they seem to stereotype others.*

Christian: After Rose makes this statement about educated people she pauses. The pause is a direct challenge to the students, to me. "Am I wrong?" she seems to be asking. She looks over the crowd of students, straight at me. She dares me to disagree with her. I don't.

Rose: For me, I started drinking and drugging when I was nine. By the time I was 12, I was totally into drugs and alcohol. By that time I developed a wall already, don't let nobody in. Then my dad's brother died, and he fell off. He became a complete alcoholic. My mom was just down depressed. Finally, me and my dad got into a fight and I beat his ass, and from that point forward I was the ruler of the house. At least in the sense of economics and stuff like that. I didn't have a job, but I told my mom how to pay the bills. I raised my sister. I did all these things. I was going on 12.

Christian: Rose doesn't appear sad as she talks about this, but it certainly saddens her audience. I'm listening to her and I'm wondering how this is possible. Taking on the parental role and lost in alcohol and drugs at 12 years old. The wrongness of it is so deep, so complete, so sad.

Walls

Rose: I developed a whole don't talk, don't trust, don't feel kind of scenario, which I'm amazed at how true that is. I always thought that educated people don't know what the hell they're talking about, especially, you know, if you don't live it, you just study it. But it was true for me. That's how I was: don't talk, don't trust, don't feel. That's how all gangsters are. Hell, that's how it is with most of you people too, but especially in the gang-banging world.

Christian: Reflecting later on the above statement, I know exactly what she's talking about. In the classroom we teach about "boundaries." You might recognize the concept in the common reference to someone being in someone else's "space." Same thing. The only difference between boundaries and Rose's walls is the flexibility, the ability or willingness to let emotions flow in and out. Rose's walls allow minimal to zero flexibility. No emotions in or out. She was not going to let anyone cross her boundaries and get in her space.

Rose: There is no such thing as emotions for us. Everyone has a kind of self that we present to other people so that they don't know what's going on underneath us. For me, I was either content or I was angry. Always hating White and Red. Hating and not trusting. Those are the two things that you feel in the gang. The whole time you're

doing anything, you're either content or you're angry. Those are the only two things that happen for you. There aren't all those variety of pretty feelings and you can choose the little faces of that day [this is a reference to an assessment tool used with children to allow them to identify, from a variety of

facial expressions, how they are feeling]. *It doesn't exist. It's two things: content or mad.*

Christian: As Rose spoke, you could feel her wall. Her entire countenance demonstrated the wall she had raised. You could sense the barricade. Fortified. You could just feel her defying you to try to get through it. The wall she speaks of isn't just some academic image, some hypothetical illustration. The wall is real—it's physical, and it's secure.

Moving In

Rose: What ended up happening is I moved in with my boyfriend, and that was my beginning, my emergence in the gang life. During that time, because it was still so new and there weren't so many members; it wasn't so organized. There weren't the rituals and all the things that come along with being beat in, or sexed in, or pulling a train [having sex with multiple members], *or whatever. For me, I was doing the dirt. I was making my money. I was selling my dope. I was fighting. I was representing. I was doing everything they was doing, and that's how I got my respect. And the gang was my transport or vehicle for my drug and alcohol abuse.*

Christian: This was an important point that I missed in class and only caught later while listening to the tape. Rose says the gang was her transport, her vehicle. The majority of gang literature argues that the gang is a replacement for the family. Rose confirms that idea later. But here she speaks of being in a gang in a very different light. Here, the gang is a means of getting pain dulled, getting a fix. It's not *all* about being part of a family. It's more complex than that. It's deeper than that. Membership in a gang is a vehicle for many driving forces, specifically the anger, hate, and violence that has its origin in growing up in a racist, sexist, homophobic, and oppressive society.

Loyalty

Rose: This whole time I was still very detached, but the most perplexing thing, I guess, for people to understand, is why somebody would choose to be in this lifestyle, what pushes them there, what gets them to be that way. It depends. I think that I would say specifically that females are very much relationship based. I got involved in it because of my boyfriend, and that's still the major of pull for a lot of girls. Females are more relationship based. The guys go more after the machismo stuff; they go after the pride, the respect, the power. For me it was relationship—very connected. I learned about being in a family. I learned everything I didn't learn as a child. I learned the same things that everybody in the world professes to want. I learned respect. I learned trust. I learned loyalty. I learned honesty. The loyalty that you get from banging is tremendous. It's synonymous with love and the connection is overwhelming.

Christian: I ask Rose about love. Where does love play a part in the gang?

Rose: Love? I never heard nobody, including my baby's dad, say that he loves me. They said "I would die for you," and that meant everything to me. That was what I said to my little sister. I said "I would die for you." I would give you the only thing that I was given on the day I was born. My life, my breath. I took in a breath and that made me exist. I would give that to you. That's all that I have to give to you cause I have nothing. I have nothing. That's what I got from being with the gang.

On the other hand, if you ask gangsters about their siblings, they're usually very adamant about them not getting involved in the lifestyle that they've chosen, which is very strange, I guess. But it makes sense. You love it. You're connected to it. This is who you are, but yet when you're looking at it through somebody else, you know that you can see the negativity. You can't see it through your own eyes, but you know they're there; the feelings that you don't allow anybody to know, the fear that is there. You don't want your little sister or brother to have that, and the same time you don't ever admit that that is what is going on inside you.

Christian: As I'm listening to this, I feel a deep sense of confusion and frustration. I hear Rose describing the "tremendous" loyalty, trust, honesty, and respect that she gets from the gang, and yet she turns around and tells us that most gang members are "adamant" that their siblings don't get into the gang. I think that the contradiction points to the depth that gang members feel, that they have to defend against who they are and the actions they take as gang members. There is a part of them that knows, that understands, how wrong it is for them to be in gangs, and they don't want their siblings to follow suit.

Passive Suicide; Passive Life

Rose: The experts, the edumacated [sic] *people, talk all the time about how gang members are passive suicidal. They don't want to live. They don't see any life for themselves. They have nothing, and we* [the educated people] *got to save them. Hell, for me that wasn't it. For me banging was passive life. What did I have to live for in your world? What exists in your world for me? There is no reason for me to be in your world. But with the gangs, I have something to believe in. I have something to fight for. I have something to represent. I have somebody that stands behind me and is always there for me.*

Christian: Later, as I consider this last statement, I believe it has enormous implications. Two worlds. One world empty, the other chaotic but full. Does it matter that the full world, the gang world, is chaos? I don't think so. The chaos, with all its inherent danger, is preferred to emptiness. I think that there is an important message that she tells us here, but it's hidden in her language. An empty world. What does that mean? For Rose, I believe it is not just that "our" world is empty, but rather her belief that there is *no place for her* in our world. I remember hearing the deep sense of exclusion, her lack of recognition, and her sense of being devalued and oppressed. I hear the anger and I understand where it comes from; but I also hear an appeal. "Tell me what exists in your world for me," she demands/pleads. "Give me something/someone to believe in so that I can be part of it."

I think that here Rose is speaking of a much larger issue than her simply feeling as though she is not part of "our" world. I believe she's speaking of a society that continues to disconnect and push away youth, especially youth of color. It's not Rose that doesn't want to feel connected to our society, it's that our society sends a clear message that these youth aren't valued or wanted.

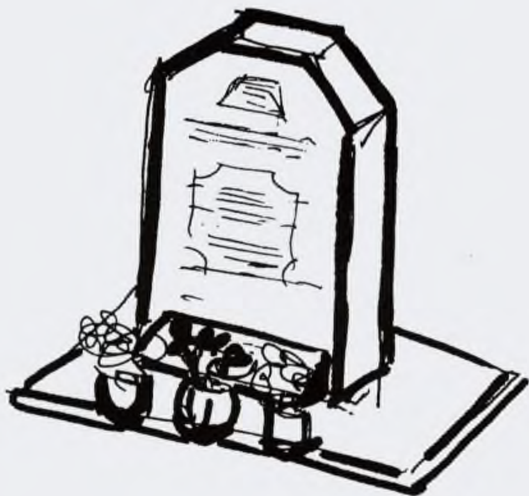
Rose: So, all the things that people perceive as being passive suicidal, I perceive as passive life, because without my gang life, I had nothing. Without that, I was nobody. Everything in gang life is chaotic. I've been living in chaos since I was eight years old. I know how to run in chaos; I know how to live in it; I know the power of it. I'm so secure

being a lunatic because that's how I know how to be. I know how to survive in that. I know what that looks like. I know my responsibility. I know my obligations. I know all that stuff.

Christian: A student raises her hand. I wonder if that's fear in the student's eyes or respect. I wonder if there is a difference to Rose. She asks Rose when would be the best time to intervene with gang kids.

Timing is Everything

Rose: The best time to intervene with these kids is where there is a trauma, a specific crisis. Look, this life is criminalistic. Not only are you looking at death daily, but you're also looking at incarceration. Of course, both those two things are expected. It's what's going to happen. It's anticipated. I don't have a tomorrow. I only have today. I don't have yesterday, unless somebody did something to me; then I've got to check that right. I've got to get my justice. But, other



than that, that's the only kind of future or past that I had. The present was all I thought about.

After a while though, Bloods started banging Bloods, Crips started banging Crips. So everything's getting more confused. I'm not understanding my enemy anymore. And then there was this house party where two people got shot. It started things in motion. People died. A friend died. I was the last person to talk to him. Like I said, it started things in motion. More folks died. People blamed me. I blamed me. It was traumatic. It wasn't something that altered my wisdom; it just kind of made me think about the loyalty, start questioning people around me.

Christian: In retrospect, I think this is another central point. The crisis got her thinking: thinking about the effects of her actions on the people around her, and thinking about how events were affecting her in the long run rather than just the present. Thinking has been a key in everything Rose has said to me about intervention. She wants to get the youth to think, to reflect, to imagine, and to consider. She then expands on the idea and tells me that it's not only thinking, but thinking and *feeling* the effects on others, and on their future.

Rose: A second thing is my little sister. I wouldn't let her kick with us, so what ended up happening was she banged the other line. She got into gangs, but she didn't follow my steps. I was a blue[Crip] *fighter, and she was a red* [Blood] *fighter. It got me thinking.*

Those two things weighted very heavily on me. There were a lot of other things. The point is, when people are in that kind of trauma state of mind, they're more willing to look at more than just the present. There's this lady, Regi. She's is an adult advisor at GRASP. She got me looking at, and thinking about, the animosity, the confusion, the hatred, and the losses that I had within myself, for myself, because of what I had done. She got me thinking about the remorse that I didn't understand, the guilt that was there but I hadn't seen. I started to see that that was what was fueling the anger and stuff, because I didn't like who I was. Regi's been, for lack of a better way to explain, my mentor in this whole process. I hated her when I met her, couldn't stand her. I tested her and I tested her and I tested her and she stayed on with me. She's been the one who stuck it out. It took a long time.

Christian: Rose tells the class: *"I hated her when I first met her. I couldn't stand her."* Yet *Regi* is the one who has become

the mentor. Regi is White, female, and has authority, three qualities that Rose was never fond of. Yet, Regi is her mentor. As a clinician, you've got to wonder how that happens. How does the change occur? How do we get past all our differences, and when does the transformation in the relationship occur?

Rose: Plus, hell, Regi's crazy too. I mean, she didn't do the things I did, but she has her own baggage. In a way, she bangs too. So do y'all. So do all y'all.

All Y'all

Rose: Society, all y'all, every single one of you bang, if you got a job. What do your employers want? They want your trust. They want your loyalty. They want your honesty. They want you to be prompt; they want all of you. You come a dime a dozen to them. You don't want the job? Somebody else will take it. You know they want all that from you, and that's banging. It's the same thing. They want you to represent.

Hell, our worlds aren't so different after all. They just look different. Knowing that makes living in this world much easier, and so now my changes are progressing in the right way. I'm learning how to trust. I'm learning what love means.

Christian: As I listen to her words for the second time on tape, I begin to hear Rose struggling to answer some of those relationship questions, striving to connect the two worlds that she defined earlier. Those two worlds look as different to the worker as they do to the gang kids. But are they really? Is Rose so different? Is her gang world so different? Yes it is, but I think that, in all actuality, there are more similarities than differences. Focusing on the similarities is one way to begin to bridge the gap. Rose says she has emotional baggage. Regi, her mentor, also has baggage. Both have done things or made decisions they later regretted. There are many core similarities that we, as clinicians, can highlight to bridge the gap. Use of self as a therapeutic tool, as we "edumacated" people like to say. We all have baggage.

Rose: I know I'll survive. I'll always survive. That will never leave me. But now I'm learning how to live. I'm refocusing. I've been in school [college] *for five years, and I still ain't got a major, but that's okay. I'm going to school.*

Ain't No Pain like a Woman Scorned

Christian: A student asks about female gang members today. Are they different than when Rose began? How does Rose feel about them?

Rose: I think in one word, I'm afraid of them. OK, that was four words. When I was coming up, I came up behind my baby's dad. My baby's dad has a tattoo on his arm of our gang. I have mine on my inner thigh. I was not part of the gang system so much as I was a part of him. And girls today, and guys like them, will get beat in. You know, they do a little dirt, crime, or whatever and now females act just like guys. The reason that I said that I'm fearful is because we [women] *are the nurturers. We're the lovers of the world. We do what we do for love. You know, we kinda get involved in gangs because we love this man, and we're doing all this stuff for them. Not anymore. That's not why girls get in gangs now. Now they do it for the same reason as guys. They're mad, and violence for them is automatic. And don't piss on one of them either, cause ain't no pain like a woman scorned. They're very devious about it. Now they're making their own cliques. Bernadette* [a female gang member Rose is currently working with] *was beat in by five dudes, five men actually. They weren't even kids. Five guys beat her onto the set, and she chose that.*

Walking in Two Different Worlds

Christian: Rose talks about the different worlds: our world and the gang world. A student asks Rose how she should walk in the gang world as she's working with a gang member.

Rose: Walk carefully. Walk slowly. They'll be very confrontational with you. They'll test you, the whole way around and then back again. If you're afraid of violence,

if you're afraid to see it, then stay out of their world.

Christian: Rose talks often of getting them to think. A student asks, "Think about what?"

Rose: Getting them to think about the things that go on with them in their world. Just everyday things like, "What made me do that?" Small things. "Why did I say that?" "Where did that come from?" "How could you do that differently?" Make them think and not just react. Hell, we don't even do that as adults in this world.

Just Listen

Christian: A student asks Rose what the single key to working with gang members would be. That's just like academia isn't it. Wanting the keys? Wanting the specific steps—in order, please. Isn't that just like us, wanting an organized, linear list of solutions.

Rose: Listen and guide. Don't teach. You can't teach them shit. They're not looking for a teacher. They're not looking to be taught anything. They don't even understand that they need to be taught. You let them lead you, and they'll come out of it. And when you start getting somebody to start to change, to think about the things that are going on, to start to redefine—you remember that I'm telling you this— you better have something to replace it! It's not like: can I just give you a hug or something, and then they change. It's just like the whole alcoholic thing. You can't change them unless, first of all, they recognize that they need to. And second of all, that they want to. Then you kind of have to guide them to that place where they understand how to change and what to change into. And it has to be, it has to be, that you guide them through their own mess, their own chaos. It's okay to share of yourself, and to say that yeah, I've been there. I've done that. But you can't give them information from your past because what changed and altered you, or what you've read in a book, probably won't fit them, it won't be their answer.

Ask them to help you figure out what needs to be done. And I don't mean asking them like [imitating a therapist, sitting up straight, hand on chin, legs crossed neatly] *what do you think we should do? I don't mean like that. I mean like a conversation, a dialog. Talk about things. Be real with what's going on. That's one thing, that's why Regi's such an important part of me, because I know she's tainted. She ain't no different than me. She just didn't bang, but she made bad choices. You know, she did things that she regrets, and so that kind of opened the doorway for us.*

Christian: Sound simplistic? Sound like a cliché? It's neither, but it's important to note here that this is a long, difficult process we're talking about. For Rose and her mentor, Regi, the relationship took almost three years to build. The development of a relationship with any gang youth takes time. It takes patience. It takes consistency. It takes work.

Instead of Drinking, Go Bowling.

Christian: A student asks Rose: "What do we replace the gang life with?" "What would work?" This brings a laugh from Rose. She shakes her head and tells a story.

Rose: There's this barrier between you and them. A wall, remember? But I think there's ways to go around that. You just got to be creative, I guess. Bowling! You know that shit's boring. We went bowling. It was actually funny. It was amazing. But you try to do those things, and expose them to other things at the same time that you're trying to guide them.

We took some kids skiing once and I think it was the funniest thing. A bunch of gang members skiing. And on the way up there, the car kept backfiring and everybody was, you know, paranoid. So all the way up there we couldn't figure out what it was. We're ducking all the way up there, and we get up there and they're mad. They don't want to do this. There's this Mexican (Joerge) who's saying, like, "Mexicans don't ski." You know, he was heated, and yet you know what? He was the last one off the mountain. I mean just giving them the opportunity to get out and do things.

Student: "I don't believe that can be enough."

Rose: I know that it's not a fix. But you got to replace what you're taking away, and it takes a lot of, what do you call that, like support and longevity, I guess. Consistency and pressure to guide this person that you're trying to change. So, to do that and open that doorway is wonderful. But what do you do with it then? You know, it's very important to find somebody that they can believe in or connect with. Also, when you work with gang kids, you don't do nine to five. You know, my time would never come before nine thirty, ten o'clock [p.m.]. *You know, that's just when it started. Please! I wasn't peaked until like one thirty in the morning. So to be able to call somebody when you need them and have that connection is very important as well.*

Waiting for the Connection

Student: "What's the hardest part of working with adolescents who are involved in gangs?"

Rose: The first call is always the hardest to get to. You're always waiting the longest time for them to actually, I don't know if it's getting up the nerve, or figuring out if they trust you, or what it is. For them to just call that first time. But then once it's there, then they want to call you all the time. Just be patient. Listen. Be consistent. It'll come to you.

It Came to Me Around Three a.m.

Christian: It came to me around three a.m., the reason I was so mad at Rose. That's the usual time when something like that hits me. A name I couldn't remember, a song, an author. It always comes to me early in the morning. It was a tough one for me, which explains why I got so angry. What I realized is this simple but hard truth: I have to start *all over* with *every* kid.

Whether you're working in the school system or an agency, politics, juvenile justice, residential or community work, time on the job and experience gives you an advantage. When you work at a place for 10, 15 years, you have a reputation and base of earned respect that you bring to the table. People listen to you and value your ideas in a manner that is not the case for someone who's brand new to the job. Experience gives you more pull, more clout.

I realized that it's not that way at all when you're working with gang kids. It doesn't matter to a single one of them that I've been working with teens since 1982. Seventeen years' experience? Means nothing. Ph.D. behind my name? Carries no weight, zero. Developed and taught courses specifically designed around adolescent violence and gang membership? Zippo. At the beginning of the relationship, my reputation means nothing. I have not earned respect. I have no clout, no credibility.

Although it may sound like it, I'm not discounting the degrees, the work experience, or the professional expertise that one gains. I'm talking about being able to set those professional trappings aside in order to open one's self up for an authentic encounter. To develop a genuine relationship with any of the gang youth, to be able to get through the depth of anger, confusion, fear, humiliation, and mistrust, you have to start at the beginning. To get around or through the wall that Rose speaks of, you have to go back to your Direct Practice 101. Authenticity. Empathic listening. Consistency. Patience. Availability. There are no short cuts. No advanced credit for previous accomplishments here. These are all fundamental in our work. In the beginning we need to connect with the gang members that we work with. We need to slowly develop meaningful relationships with them.

Conclusion

The majority of Rose's presentation focused on her vivid description of life as a gang member and how one might intervene with an individual currently in a gang. Because of her style, it would be easy to stay on the surface and simply focus on that alone. However, at a deeper level, there are valuable insights regarding our youth's lack of connection to society. Rose's presentation

highlights a larger crusade and difficult questions with which we, as social workers, must struggle.

In her self description, Rose suggests that, to a great extent, her motive for getting into the gang can be connected to her experience growing up in a family where substance abuse and violence was extreme. She also notes her negative peer group. Many of our gang youth have similar explanations. However, listening to Rose at a deeper level, one recognizes the experiences and consequences of youth who continue to search for meaning and belonging in an oppressive, discriminating culture, in a racist and sexist society that alienates minority youth. For Rose, like so many of our youth, the options are to be alone, or to "gang-up" and fight the system. She chose the latter.

If one accepts this premise, then early prevention at a societal level rather than intervention at an individual level becomes the major focus. The development of culturally responsive services for people with infants and small children is desperately needed, rather than the continued frenzy to build more prisons. Also needed is a societal discussion on the effects of racism on our youth, the effects of sexism on our young women, and the extreme anger that is built when one is forced to grow up struggling with poverty, discrimination and oppression. These issues are real and the effects are explosive. As social workers, we have a responsibility to advocate for these youth and to help society at large to lower its passive contempt and/or outright dismissal of these at-risk youth as being hopeless and untreatable. These struggles, I think, represent our real work. Welcome to the job. ❑

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Essays on Violence from Students at John F. Kennedy High School, Granada Hills, California

Willy Ackerman – English Teacher, Kennedy High School

Whether the bruises are physical or mental, the fear real or imagined, we are all – directly or indirectly – affected by violence. Though we create a relatively safe environment within the school, there is still the distance to be covered, by bus or by foot, between school and home. And for far too many, the most dangerous place of all is home itself. I stand in awe of my students who manage to survive – not only the very real dangers of their lives, but the emotional trauma as well – their dignity their hope, their charity in tact.

Aldo Velez

When I was in the sixth grade I was threatened by one of my classmates. This boy was like the giant from "Jack in the Bean Stalk." He was the giant, and I was Jack. He was one of those giants who liked to pick on people who were smaller than he was. I'll bet that if I were the giant and he were jack, he wouldn't have wanted to mess with me.

He and his friend Slim socked me one day because I did not give him a scholastic paper; instead, I gave it to a really nice and pretty girl who I thought deserved it more.

One day, Bully told me that if I did not help him do his standards, he would stab me. At first I said, "NO!" But then I remembered that he and Slim had socked me, so I said okay.

I was dumb. I did not tell my teacher. I thought the school wouldn't do anything. When my mom and dad found me locked inside my room crying, I told them what was going on in school, and the next day they went to my school and told the principal. The next thing I knew, the school had expelled Bully for threatening me. I should have gone straight to my parents in the first place.

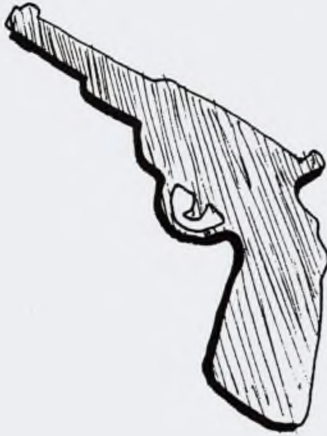
I should have stepped up to Bully, but like I said, he was one chunky giant. Also, my mom and dad didn't want me to fight.

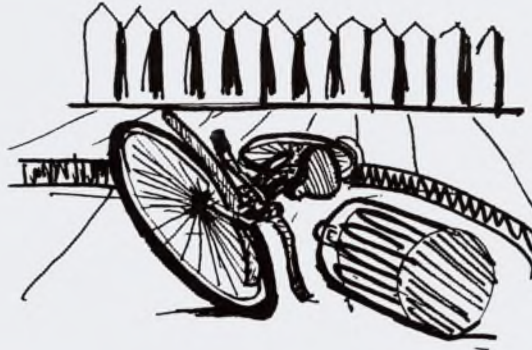
After all this happened in my elementary school, we decided to move away from that neighborhood so I could go to another school. Violence separated me from my best friends, friends I had known since first grade.

Still, sometimes I feel unsafe. I feel like going to school with a bulletproof vest on. I feel I might get shot with the kind of violence going on nowadays. What if I go outside and get caught in a gang shooting? Or a drive-by? Hey, I only have one life to make something of myself. But with the kind of violence today, I might not be alive to see my children grow up, or I might not even be alive to have children at all.

The school security guards don't check everyone to see if they have a weapon. I think the staff of our schools should go to classrooms and check each person with the metal detectors; this way no one would get hurt, at least not in school.

If you are being threatened by someone, you must tell someone right away; your parents, your dean, or your teachers. Who cares if your friends make fun of you, as long as you're alive. Violence is not the way to solve problems; it just makes the problem a lot worse. So just try to talk it over.





Anonymous

In the evening hours of September 29, 1995, at a 7-11 Mini-Mart in Sun Valley, a 25-year-old male Caucasian was murdered by a teenage gang member with alleged mental problems. The victim was shot in the parking lot of the mini-mart after he'd used a pay phone to call his girlfriend. The perpetrator apparently thought the victim was a rival gang member. Few words were exchanged before the shooting occurred. The victim might have survived had his head not hit the pavement when he fell. Three hours after arriving at Holy Cross Hospital, he did from loss of blood.

The victim was my father's sister's son.

Just another statistic of violence. Every victim is somebody's father, son, brother, uncle, nephew, grandson, or cousin. Tony was a father with two very young sons, two boys who will never have a chance to know their daddy.

Violence affects everyone it touches, often changing their lives forever. The past can never be changed; the consequences of violence can never be undone, no matter how much it may be desired. All people need to think about the consequences of their actions. Maybe if they did, there would be less senseless violence.

Stephanie Mora

It is a Saturday night, cold and pitch black. It's around 10:30 p.m. in the city of Bellflower. A seventeen-year-old guy is riding his bike home from his friend's house. He is just pulling up to his house when someone pushes him off the bike. He suddenly feels shocking thrusts of pain on his back, then his stomach and chest. He looks up and sees a black shadow; then after a blow to his head, he blacks out....

This guy is not a perfect little schoolboy, but he is not a serious criminal either. He is one of those guys in a rough neighborhood, hanging around with the wrong crowd. He has great art skills; the way he expresses those skills is by tagging on building walls. One day he was out with his friends, helping a friend draw a picture on a wall. While doing this they crossed out a "gang's" name.

He paid the consequence.

His mother runs out of the house in her robe after hearing someone yell. She sees her son a few feet away from her front gate, lying on the ground unconscious. She sees blood coming from cuts on his eyes and a busted lip. There is blood coming from his nose and his head. She can barely recognize him from all the blood. Her first thought is that he must be dead. She runs in and calls 911; he is rushed to the hospital in an ambulance along with his mother. The doctor comes in and explains to his mother that her son has gone into a coma from a blow to the head with a metal bat.

Day after day she goes to the hospital hoping to find her son awake. Day after day there is no progress. He has been in a coma

for two and a half months now. The doctors tell his mother that there are slim chances that he will wake up, and if he does, he will never walk again. After three months, he wakes up from the coma. He will have to go through months of therapy.

This story is not a "what if?" or an imaginary story. This really happened. It happened to a friend of mine. The whole experience is traumatic and painful. He never saw the faces of the guys who almost killed him.

Violence surrounds us all in everyday life, and we have become so accustomed to it that we don't even consider anymore that something is wrong. Knowing that people can get away with crimes makes me feel very angry. If criminals plan out exactly what they want to do, they can get away with it.

Knowing that some teens see violence as entertainment is sad. Do we really have to see others get hurt in order to get pleasure? Perhaps that is why teens can hurt each other without thinking twice. When teens see their favorite singers involved in gangs and violence, they don't think it is wrong. They see how successful singers have become even though they are involved in all those things. Why should they stop being violent? Even governments use violence to solve problems. Whatever happened to "Violence isn't the answer?"

Edgar Garcia

Violence has affected us in the sense that we don't feel safe anymore. The recent tragedy at Columbine High School is an example that makes one think: Why is this happening? Who is to blame? Is this happening more often? We still hear that school is the safest place to be, but we at Kennedy High School in Granada Hills may think differently after what happened at the Jewish Center in neighboring North Hills a couple of months ago.

I personally experienced some of this violence in middle school where my best friend had a pocketknife pulled on him. This happened because my friend once stepped on the attacker's new sneaker shoes. It was all an accident, but the attacker did not buy that it was an accident so he threatened vengeance. Sure enough, from that day on he and his friends started picking on my friend and seemed to enjoy it.

The incident took place in the yard of our middle school during P.E. Although teachers were outside, they never saw it happen. My friend was just minding his own business when the attacker got him in a choke hold and in a flash pulled out a slim, red knife that looked like a Swiss Army knife. As I approached them the attacker let my friend go and started saying filthy words.

My friend never told his parents about his problem with this boy until the incident with the pocketknife. When the incident happened, my friend was a little shaken up, but afterwards he was fine. Although nothing happened, I still can't believe that I experienced this sort of violence at school at the age of 12. I sometimes think that if the attacker had been under the influence of drugs, the outcome could have been a lot different, possibly being that I would be visiting my friend at the cemetery instead of his house.

The aggressor was expelled from that school and has never been seen again. Who can be blamed? Is our government doing enough to prevent this? Now that I am in high school I fear even more because so

many kids like the attacker are around. So many questions come to mind: When will it all end? How bad is it going to get? And who will stop it?

Daniela Arellano

The smell of sweat, the yells and the laughter of other high school students permeated the humid air. I had put on my white gym clothes and was coming out of the locker rooms when a tall, bald boy with fair skin, bulging muscles, and angry eyes walked directly up to a brown skinned boy, about three inches shorter and chunkier, pushed him and yelled, "you f**king cunt! What are you looking at, you stupid fat a__?" Naturally Boy Two, who had done nothing to Boy One, pushed back. This triggered a series of punches and kicks, more pushing, and more kicking. A crowd of excited students formed around the two boys. Finally after a couple of minutes, two male administrators pulled the boys apart. The aggressor laughed at his chunky opponent. "Stupid cunt," he said conversationally. The hapless boy, bleeding from the nose and lip, his left eye already beginning to get puffy and purple, appeared as if he wanted to cry. Surely embarrassed by the crowd circled around him, he held the tears back as he was led to the Dean's office. I never saw either boy again.

My mother has always taught me right from wrong. She has helped me understand the pain that not only the kids go through, but also their parents, whenever kids are involved in violence. I know that my mother would be heartbroken to see me come home bruised and bleeding, just as any other parent would. Therefore, parents have the moral responsibility to impose these beliefs upon their children. Reprimanding them when they do wrong is a good way to start.

I believe that there are many things that contribute to violence in schools. We must ask ourselves not only who, but also what is to blame. We must go outside the schools and observe the daily influences on students. Environments, role models, friends, music, and dress style all affect them. Family traditions, values, and habits might encourage a child to feel that it is okay to mimic what they see at home. Students might act violently toward others whom they believe don't fit in for whatever reason. Groups might use their numbers to feel superior to others.

Schools can help reduce violence among their students. Grant High School has already taken action by having students sign petitions promising that they will not engage in violent acts. Workshops for teachers, such as Impact Training, offer tactics for teachers to help students with conflicts. Schools should also speak to the students in assemblies. Exploring the danger and cruelty involved in the acts of violence will make students less likely to fight with others. By having students imagine themselves as the parents of the kids who are being beaten, or as the victims themselves, might make them think twice about what they are doing. Teachers should teach their students the immorality of violence. The ideas that work in some schools should be passed on to others as well.

All I ask is that there be more programs and activities in which kids are taught to keep the peace among themselves. Some programs will not eliminate violence completely, but will make a difference – saving lives and sorrow.

Sean Haltsead

Violence, it seems, cannot be avoided. It always exists in one form or another. It kind of makes me feel uncomfortable. I do have to admit that I have been violent in the past, but in the world we live in today, people and kids can be very cruel. They will hurt you in order to get what they want. People have to protect themselves.

Hiding his intentions, the gangster said, "Let's take a walk," pleasantly to Brian, my friend and longtime neighbor, who had been walking from fifth to sixth period, not expecting violence. "Na, I got no beef," he said, which meant, "I don't want to fight." Another gangster jumped down from a low wall, ran towards him, and hit him in the face. Six or seven guys surrounded my friend. My friend grabbed one and smashed his face up pretty badly. Then he turned and got hit in the head again. He grabbed the second guy, and socked him in the side of the face. He was throwing punches left and right. He didn't connect too many times after that, but he was never off his feet. Despite his 5'11", 260-pound frame, he never had a chance.

The school police arrived, the gangsters scattered, and my friend was taken to the office. He was expelled "for his own good." But if he felt in enough danger, he would have taken the initiative on his own. When Brian got jumped, I felt angry because this gang is big. It's called San Fernando. (This valley is large!) They heard that my friend said "F**ck Santa Fe." He never said it though. They had been taunting him.

I am a white teenager at age 15, and I am a minority in a lot of places, including where I live. I have been violent in the past. Last summer some guy was messing with me, doing things that pissed me off. I told him, "Go f**k yourself," and punches flew. A big reason why people fight is that they want to be the biggest, and the strongest, and in control of others. I have also been jumped and on the receiving end of the fighting, but I ran and luckily my quickness got me away from serious injury. I was jumped because they thought that I was a white supremacist (I am not), but they didn't tolerate any of that.

What causes violence? Life is a battle of power. If you have a lot of power, you can intimidate others, even manipulate them. If someone has this power, and another is competing for the same power, they will easily get violent. I understand this because I see it all the time. I watch and observe sometimes when people are yelling and screaming. I think we need a system to settle these conflicts, and whoever thinks of a way to release the pressure and settle these conflicts is going to be thanked by a lot of people.

Can we ever rid ourselves of violence? The process of moving away from violence is hard and grueling. I think that the key to abolishing most violence is to resolve all those tiny problems. If we do that, we will all get along much better, and we will not be able to do this without a way to release stress and built up emotions. Maybe if we're all honest and straight out, we can solve a lot of problems originating from miscommunication.

Jessica Barraza

Everyone sees things through their own eyes, their race, their country, their values. A White sees things through his White eyes; a Black sees things through his Black eyes. Here I will see things through my own Mexican eyes.

It seems everyone looks at Mexicans as lazy, criminal, and useless. People often see us as violent. And sometimes we are, in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Violence is a means of survival. In order to survive we do little things, which cause bigger things to happen.

Violence surrounds us. It's on the streets, in the media, in schools, and even in homes. I've experienced violence in my life, but more have experienced worse. One time I went to the park to meet an old friend of mine. Yes, he was from a gang, and yes, he was armed. At that moment, my supposed *homies* (slang for true friends) passed by. They also were in gangs – rival gangs. They pulled up on the parking lot as I was talking to my friend; they grabbed him and pulled a shank against his throat. They were about to slice it in front of me, and they wouldn't have even cared. Yup! True homies they were. Two policemen on bikes just watched. The guy with the knife ran away and the policemen just watched.

Violence surrounds us. Kids grow up seeing incessant violence, and the result is that violence is the only way they know how to cope. Little kids want to hang with the big kids. They see money and drugs pass back and forth. Drugs and money lead to violence and gangs. It's about territory and protection. Once you step out of your own hood, you're dead. Like a turtle uses its shell for protection, a gangster uses its hood.

In September, 1996, a famous rapper, Tupac Shakur, was shot and killed after a Tyson vs. Holyfield fight; the case has still not been solved. Six months later, another famous rapper, Christopher "Notorious B.I.G." Wallace, was also shot and killed; the murder case has not been solved. In June 1999, a close friend of mine was shot and killed by a rival gang; seven months later the murder case has still not been solved. In 1999, there was the shooting in Columbine, Colorado. Two kids with guns went to their high school and shot twenty-five people, including themselves. Many have been lost, and nothing has been solved.

What usually happens when students get caught in a fight at school? They get suspended or expelled. Zero tolerance policy after the fact is useless. Why can't teachers and counselors intervene before the problem escalates to violence? What are the prizes for violence? Nothing! What do we get out of it? Nothing! As time passes, so do people. Too many people are shot everyday.

Violence surrounds us. It's true, actions speak louder than words, and teens do need role models. We also need words of wisdom. What are the words of wisdom? We don't know! Where do we get wisdom? Does it come from inside ourselves? Does it come from around us? In homes, many do have role models. My father, who drinks sometimes, takes his anger out on us. Sometimes he doesn't know who he is. Alcoholic parents can affect the teens who live with them.

Changes are all part of life. Good or bad, big or small. We must learn from our mistakes. What I see through my naked Mexican eyes is an American culture in conflict; Mexicans are placed under a microscope; there is a double standard. But there is hope. The cause and changes come within us. We can make a difference within ourselves. With God's help, we can increase the Peace!

Too many tears have been wiped, too many shoulders have been leaned on, and too many coffins have been buried. We need to end the violence.

Victor Razzo

When I was growing up, the police spent more time in my apartment complex than anywhere else. By the time I was seven, I had heard my downstairs' neighbor being robbed for everything he had, and shot dead because it wasn't enough.

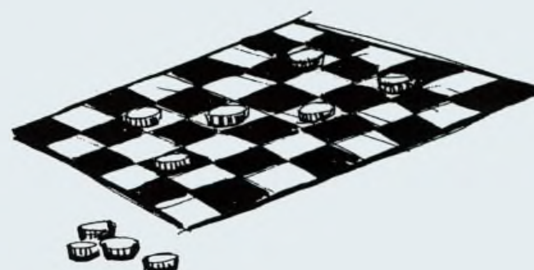
But my earliest memory, and the event that I remember the most, is this: I went to a nearby church with my mom and brother. On our way there I saw a man standing near a street light. Although his black and white checkered shirt and his creased oversized khaki pants with black Nike shoes were bathed in the soft orange glow from the lamp above him, his face was covered in a pitch-black shadow. The word "anonymous" comes to mind.

My mom told me not to stare at the anonymous man and to keep walking. My attention was directed back to the clothed shadow that was now about half a block behind us, when another shadow with the silhouette of a car stopped across the street from the man and another shadow got out of the car and I walked toward the street light. When we were about two blocks past the shadows, I heard two voices behind me arguing loudly.

My desire to see what the whole thing was about stopped me from moving and made me turn back to look at the source of the yelling. Soon, I saw the second shadow reach out his arm and point it at the upright pile of clothes. The really loud noise that followed suppressed my curiosity as a new feeling took over my body: FEAR. My mom grabbed my arm and yanked me along as she ran the rest of the way to the church.

When we got there, my mom was yelling at me, telling me *nunca, nunca, nunca te pares a ver dos personas discutiendo.* Never, never, never stop to see two people arguing. I felt sad and thought I had done something wrong. But I know now that she wasn't yelling at me because I had done something wrong, but because she too will always remember the anonymous man with no face.

She too will live with unremitting fear.



Anonymous

I am a healthy, strong, and talented 15-year-old girl. I am involved in many activities in and out of school. I play on the girls' varsity volleyball, soccer, and track teams at Kennedy High School. I am very happy with my life, but underneath, I have a dark secret.

I remember...

I am eight. My dad and I are playing checkers in the living room. My mom and my sister are watching television. It seems

like a nice peaceful family night. But as we are playing my dad moves his checker to my side of the board. I forget to king him. He gets angry and starts to yell. I get scared and pee in my pants. It seeps into the carpet and I start to cry. He sees that I peed in my pants and gets even more angry. He gets up, pulls my hair and shoves my face into the place where I peed, rubbing my face into it. My mom screams at him, but she doesn't try to stop him. He finally stops when the side of my face begins to get raw. My mom and her start to yell at each other. He gets even angrier. He gets up and goes to his room, and slams the door. My mom and my sister comfort me. My mom is trying to clean my face in the bathroom when, 15 minutes later, he comes from his room into the bathroom and gives me his Rolex watch as a sorry gift. My mom forgives him. But I don't.

I'm left with a big scab on my face. When people ask me what happened, I say that I fell off my bike. The scar stays for a couple of months, then finally fades. But the meory of it never goes away.

I remember...

I am ten years old. I'm walking down the hallway and I get in my dad's way. He grabs me by the shirt. He throws me to the ground so hard that my shirt rips while I'm being thrown. I start crying. My mom isn't home. He tells me not to tell my mom what happened. I'm forced to keep this secret from my mother.

I remember...

I am 14 years old. It's summer. It's hot and humid, and I get a rash which spreads all over my face and arms. I come home from school one day and my dad looks at me. "You're getting uglier by the day." The words hurt, and I feel abused.

I remember...

I am 14. My parents and I are watching a movie on TV. The year 1492 comes up and my dad asks me what it means. I get nervous and say, "I don't know." He gets mad and calls me a "stupid ass." He wonders how I'm so stupid, and how I can't even answer a simple question. "1492 is the year when Columbus found the new world," he yells. The thing is, whenever I talk to him, I get so nervous.

I remember...

I am 14. I'm at my grandma's house in Arizona. The phone rings, and my dad is on the other line. He doesn't even say "Hi" to me, he just asks for my grandma (his mother). She gets on the phone, and then starts to yell. When she gets off the phone, I ask her, "What happened?" She said that my parents got in a fight over my sister's behavior. I start crying, for I know what my mom is going through, and I wish I could be there with her. Then my grandma says, "Your mom doesn't realize how much your dad has helped this family. When she was a single parent, he put a roof over your head." That gets me angry. My own grandma doesn't know that her son hits and abuses us, I think.

I'm too weak to start anything, but those words get me thinking. I figure out that my parents have only been together for 12 years, and I am 14. How is that possible? This question will stay with me until the end of summer.

Then I go to stay with my sister one weekend, and my question is answered. We stay up one night talking about our past. I catch a sentence that doesn't sound right. "We weren't evil step children," she says. I finally figure out my life.

My mom was married before and my dad isn't my biological father. I find out my biological father left my mother on her own with two children, that he got remarried, and that I have a half brother out there somewhere, a whole other family that I haven't met. The thing that hurts me is that my own mom didn't tell me this. I had to find out by myself. Every night I would think about how the other side of my family is out there somewhere, how my dad wasn't actually my real dad, how my sister and I would get hit by and abusive jerk. And how I would cry myself to sleep.

When I was 14 I wanted to end my life. I would think how I wouldn't have anymore pain, physical or mental. But as I kept thinking, I knew I didn't want to leave my mom or sister. I loved them to much to lose them. I kept thinking how I wanted a future: to go to college, to get a good job doing something I love, and to start my own family. All of these thoughts kept circling in my head. I wasn't going to let some abusive jerk stand in the way of my happiness.

I'm going to have a great future with a great family. I've promised myself that when I have children, I won't be my dad. I won't hit my kids, and I won't call them names.

I am 15 years old now. I am on the girls' varsity volleyball, soccer, and track teams for Kennedy High School. I'm involved in many activities such as Key Club and CSF. I am strong. My dad doesn't physically abuse me anymore, though. Whenever he says something harsh to me, I just let it in one ear and out the other. "Sticks and stones my break my bones, but words can never hurt me."

I have the greatest sister in the world who reminds me everyday that I will never be alone. I have a whole future ahead of me. However, the past I hide will never be erased. It will stay with me forever.

But I am strong.

Stacey Valentino

In 1998, a shooting occurred near my school, Kennedy High School in North Hills. This affected the whole community, because we were all in danger. My school was locked down for four long hours; all doors and windows were locked, and no one was allowed in or out. Everyone was so hungry and had to go to the bathroom really bad, but we weren't allowed out of our classrooms because we needed to be kept safe. Everyone intensely watched the clock waiting to be let out. We were finally let out an hour after school was supposed to end.

Even though I wasn't harmed physically during the lockdown, I was still affected mentally. The next day at school I took more precautions about what was happening around me. I started using the bathrooms at school more that one time during throughout the school day. For a while I had a very hard time concentrating on the material given in class. My mind wandered off in different directions and I couldn't sit still in my seat. I constantly thought about what I would have done if someone had gotten hurt. I also began to question why it happened so close to my school. To better prepare myself for future incidents, I started taking school practice drills more seriously and listened to directions my teachers gave me. I figured that if this kind of a situation ever happened again then I wouldn't be caught off guard; I would be prepared.

The day after the shooting and lockdown, my parents wouldn't let me stay after school with my friend. They still make me come straight home. Since there is so much fear of violence, my parents won't even let me ride my bike by myself. I am paranoid just going for a jog or walk around my own neighborhood. My parents won't let me go to parties that they don't approve of. If an adult is not in charge at the party, then my being able to go is completely out of the question. For instance, if a friend of mine is planning to have an open house party, my parents won't let me go. They are afraid gang members will crash the party. They also know that someone will bring beer or drugs, and trouble will start. They completely trust me; it's other people they don't trust.

Since there seems to be violence everywhere, I have learned how to cope with it. Everywhere I go I constantly take precautions using my eyes and ears to check on what's happening around me. Even though some people are not physically harmed by violence, they are still emotionally affected. ❑

Time to Kill: Mitigating Death Sentences as Social Work

By Michel A. Coconis, Ph.D., School of Social Work, Grand Valley State University, Michigan

This narrative seeks to highlight some of the author's observations as a novice social worker and therapy client in the world where life and death issues resonate daily. One can understand how the death penalty becomes a vehicle for extending, not ending, the violence in our culture if one is prepared to examine broad contexts- including one's own.

Background

When I learned of this special issue of *Reflections*, just within two weeks of the deadline, I immediately responded to *this* call. I missed the deadline for the special issue on "Forgiveness," realizing that I was not ready to write about the topic, to tell what is both an exciting and difficult story about working with actual and presumed killers facing the death penalty.

My journey of working with and on behalf of accused and convicted killers was simplistic in its beginning – such an extraordinary job with such an ordinary start. In 1985 I was completing my MSW at Ohio State University, pursuing a self-designed social work degree wherein I chose non-traditional practicum opportunities. I first worked as a social work student in the state legislature, and then as a researcher/intern with the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction doing research on jail overcrowding and jail standards inspections.

From a starting point of thinking social workers mostly worked as issuers of food stamps, I catapulted into Ohio State's program following the unexpected death of my faculty mentor, Elisabeth Cohn. Without her guidance, I might not have imagined that I would work so close to where power is brokered and people's lives are greatly affected.

Following my admittance into the program, I dove into social work as a place to help others. C. Wright Mills' (1959) ideas about public issues rendered as private troubles (or worse, personal pathologies) solidified my deepening commitment to social justice. As such, my studies focused mainly on macro practice concerns such as policy and legislative work, community organization, grant writing, and research with very little content in "clinical" matters.

During this time, I was active in the Columbus community at large, the feminist community, and the campus student community, where I served on committees ranging from the legislative advisory committee, chaired by the university counsel, to working on anti-Apartheid efforts with student groups. For this activism, I was awarded several College of Social Work awards and was one of six recipients of the university-wide Graduate Student of the Year awards. I was armed with new knowledge and bolstered by the receipt of these awards, which conveyed to me an appreciation of my work and vision. Nevertheless, like many of my peers, I was anxious about the upcoming job hunt and, belatedly, I went to our Career Services office. I had avoided that office, for a visit there meant I would be leaving the relatively safe and structured world of academia to the world of "you've learned it, now do it" as we referred to the real working world outside of Ohio State. Little did I know how fateful that visit would be.

Getting the Job

The notice in the weekly job notice newsletter indicated there was a position open for an investigator with the Ohio Public Defender Commission. The duties included making home visits, interviewing clients for their defense in criminal matters, writing reports and working as a member of

a defense team. The ad expressed preference for an MSW. The application deadline was four weeks away.

After deciding to take a chance, it seemed I did everything wrong. I waited until the last minute to respond, and I used a dark tan paper when typing my cover letter and resume back in the days before word processing. The resume was finished as I'd used it for other job applications, but I still needed a special cover letter. I ended up making typing errors that I could only correct with white correction fluid – on dark tan paper! I had to finish the cover letter. It had to be professional. It had to get me in the door. The more I re-typed the letter, the more invested in getting an interview I became. Well, the letter I finally sent went out with three big splotches of white on the paper. I sent it and thought there would be no way I could get this interview from the sheer look of the cover letter.

To my absolute amazement, about 10 days latter I got a call from Jane, inviting me in for an interview. They had almost set the letter aside because of its appearance, but thought I might have what it takes because I actually sent it in! They needed to make a decision soon, so could I come in within the next week? I was about to have my first post-MSW job interview! I could hardly contain my excitement. What I lacked in confidence of social work skills, I trusted from what I call the "bar room" skills (that is, the social skills needed to finesse one's way around a small town bar). You meet all kinds of people there.

Within the next few days, Jane and others set up interviews with the other criminal investigators, the Public Defender for the State of Ohio, and several of the attorneys as well as the other two mitigation specialists. I became intimidated as I wondered who all of these people were and what had I gotten myself into. But I decided that since I'd worked within the state legislature with lawyers and other "important" people, surely I could survive a simple job interview.

The day was full as I was moved from office to office within the beautiful Atlas Building in Columbus. My heart raced as I went to the 11th floor to announce my arrival. Chaos abounded with phones ringing and people running from office to office when finally someone stopped to ask who I was and what I needed. From that moment, I was off on a whirlwind of questions.

The primary question was: "What is your position on the death penalty?" What was *this* about and why did they care what I, a social worker, thought about such an issue? I thought the job involved interviewing clients and their families with and for attorneys to gain information about socially and legally disadvantaged people facing criminal charges to develop their defenses. Initially, the question had me stumped. What was the right answer? I surmised being opposed to it would be the logical (and necessary) response if I were to be fully considered for this job.

Things began to get really interesting during my third interview of the day when I spoke with the Public Defender, Randy, who worked in an office filled with violence-themed paintings created by a well-publicized serial rapist with multiple personality disorder. It was during this meeting that I first realized I might really be doing some important, socially significant work if I were hired at OPDC.

Then came my time with Ken Murray, a capital defense attorney. In his tiny office, he invited me to sit in the only available spot as papers, notebooks, and legal books filled his space. He, too, asked me about the death penalty but the question that took me most by surprise was when he asked about my being a member of NOW, the National Organization for Women, and how that would affect any work I would perform with the OPDC. "Don't feminists hate lawyers?" he asked. I answered that being a feminist affords me the good sense to have a world view that balks at social injustice no matter who suffers and in what way. I further explained that being a feminist is what

might make me most able to do this work as I could see that a non-feminist woman might not be as assertive, direct, compassionate, nor have the ability to stay with difficult cases. Near the end of this interview, I quickly realized that it had been a test from the man I have come to know as one of the most dedicated defense attorneys in capital cases from anywhere in the U.S. Ken wanted to work with people who were going to help save his clients' lives and there was nothing he wouldn't do to create the best working teams he could. This anti-death penalty advocate, I later learned, had a bachelor's degree in social work. I understood then one source of his dedication, passion, and perspective. I passed Ken's 'test' and I evidently interviewed well, because the next day I was offered the job. What a learning experience awaited me. I couldn't have fully understood that this job became the journey of my lifetime.

Understanding "The Work"

My first day brought me an OPDC picture I.D. card with my fingerprints on it and a badge to use in my new job. A badge – why would I need a badge? Chris, the human resources manager laughingly said, "You'll see soon enough, and you'll need it." The excitement of my new job was turning into fear: fear for my safety (a badge?), fear of the unknown, fear of not measuring up, fear of not being able to work with all the players – attorneys being at the top of my list. That fear later turned to the fear that we wouldn't be successful in our single mission – to stop people from being sentenced to death and executed. What a clear, focused, and simple mission we had. This mission, though a powerful motivation for continuing our work, is simple, but it's weight is heavy indeed.

In addition to the badge and my new office, I was given several boxes of articles to get through in my first week. In the quiet of my office, I learned that in 1985, Ohio's death penalty statute was less than four years old. In *Gregg v. Georgia* (1976), the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Georgia law which sought to address some of the inequities of prior death penalty legislation. Many states, mostly southern, passed similar laws in their states within 18 to 24 months of the *Gregg* decision. Ohio joined the list of death penalty states later than many, but Ohio came to influence the work capital defense attorneys across the country. One of Ohio's contributions was in the developing field of mitigation with the creation of a job/working title for those of us who provided social history investigations as part of the defense team being called "mitigation specialists" and now "mitigation investigators." Ohio was one of the first states to actually employ people to do this work exclusively, rather than as part of other positions within their agencies. I became the fourth person hired in all of Ohio and, at the time, I was about the twentieth person hired in the country to become a mitigation specialist. Contrast this with the near 110 known mitigation specialists in practice today across the U.S. As I read I wondered why I had not learned much about legal issues in my MSW program as recommended by Jancovic and Green (1981).

The specialty of the mitigation specialists was in uncovering, understanding, reporting upon, and developing trial and appellate legal strategies based on the mitigation evidence provided in the forms of

in-depth (e.g., 80 to 100 pages) social histories based on detailed records collection and lengthy and numerous interviews; family and client timelines; witness reports; and other social science reports. More often than not, the mitigation specialists were not BSWs or MSWs and many attorneys, claiming to have had bad experiences with social workers, resisted calling us social workers, even those of us with degrees in social work. But, despite our job title, the work was all about social work; social justice, diversity, oppression, violence, mental health, criminal justice, health care, poverty, housing, lead paint, alcohol and drug addiction, and all the rest.

As I continued to read the articles of death penalty trials and how to manage them, I came to understand how profoundly my own life had prepared me for mitigation work. Much of my life to that point was filled with providing alternative explanations for people's behaviors and attitudes and their treatment or interaction with me or others close to me. I'd witnessed violence between my parents and several of their respective dating or marital partners. As both were married many times – to each other and to others – their patterns remained much the same: drinking that led to violence in the home (and sometimes outside in very public places) which caused tremendous effects upon my life. I am an only child to my mother, and my father's third child. I mostly lived without siblings with whom to share these stories, but my life crossed paths with my half-brothers' lives enough to share a little. Our father's drinking eventually led to his having a stroke, deteriorating health, and early death. Drinking and his own troubled childhood experiences led my father to drunk driving and, worse for me, violence against my mother and stepmothers, which I witnessed all too frequently. Luckily, I was not the direct recipient of such blows but watching their physical and emotional humiliation shaped me all the same. I spent most of my childhood seeking explanations, not excuses, for why my parents acted the way they did and why they treated me as they did. I became masterful at providing mitigation, though I did not use such a word, in my own childhood experiences

My father, one of the most generous people I have ever known, was concerned for the rights of Blacks in our community including hiring one of the first black salespeople. He worked vigorously for the Democratic Party, stopping short of running for office, and ran a successful small business, a furniture store for which my brothers and I variously appeared in both taped and live television commercials on the small local NBC affiliate. He donated money or goods for hundreds of community fundraisers and contributed to the local community in various ways. Still, he was destructive in significant ways and to hold deep admiration and extreme fear of the same person was tiring and draining on me.

Attempting to understand the complex motivations for my mother's and father's (and other family members') behaviors and actions taught me to seek explanations, rather than to blame others. In fact, I was (and am) still more likely to look inward for the blame and to seek understanding for the others outside of myself. Children of violence and other family dysfunction often blame themselves for the things that go wrong in the family, which had a powerful and lasting impact on my ability to make judgments about responsibility for actions and behavior.

Seeking explanations rather than blame for people's behaviors seems to me to be more generous in spirit, more likely to result in forgiveness than punishment, and more likely to result in genuine solutions to prevent such actions in the future. I had only to read a small portion of the Ohio death penalty statute to see that I was, quite literally, "made" for this job. Of course, I was helped in this discovery by starting psychotherapy with an MSW within one month of beginning this job. Thus my new professional and personal undertakings intersected – I wanted to mitigate for my own childhood actions and, in doing so,

wanted to find answers that others could genuinely consider in the life and death decisions about murder and capital punishment.

The Ohio statute includes a list of mitigating factors including those factors which are to be considered by the members of either a jury or a three-judge panel in the second phase of a capital trial (called the sentencing, penalty, or mitigation phase). Here, in list form, was a list of paths to forgiveness for juries and judges to follow. As it turned out, I walked around with a lengthy, but not formal, list of mitigating factors, called reframing in psychotherapy. Pushed to pass a death penalty statute, the Ohio legislature wrote specific considerations including age of defendant, mental status, victim issues but added an all-purpose factor which included "any other factor deemed to be mitigating" by the triers of fact (Ohio Legislature, 1981), leaving juries and judges the option to consider other, case-specific issues.

My first few weeks consisted of lots of reading, questioning, sitting in on legal meetings, taking furious notes, purchasing Black's Law Dictionary, attending a statewide OPDC conference on the death penalty and talking with my new therapist about the similarities in my work and my early years. This was indeed a busy time as I was getting to know my primary mitigation partner, Jane, and getting ready to replace James, the person whose position I was filling.

Finally, the big day came: our first trip to Cincinnati. Our office had been called by a private attorney who had been assigned a capital murder trial, involving a defendant who turned 18 the day before he killed his elderly neighbor. He was young, black, mildly mentally retarded, and a part of a lower middle class family. We met with the attorney who provided us with some written documentation and we were off to meet the person at the Hamilton County jail who would become my first capital client.

I had been in jails before; first with my father, later for my own arrests for protesting in Washington and Columbus, and then while working both as a volunteer in my MSW program and as part of my field experience. I wouldn't say I felt comfortable in jail but it was not a fearful experience being there. What do we do outside of the courtroom that can be taken into the courtroom and, more importantly, the jury room that will convince them to not kill our client?

"What are you doing here?"

In nearly every case, we (or I alone) meet with our clients – men and women facing the death penalty at trial requiring jail visits, or who are on death row requiring visits at the Lucasville State Penitentiary where death row was housed at that time. Initially we worked at the trial level but as time wore on we expanded our "practice" to work with clients whose appeals required initial or continuing investigation. Before the first visit with our client, we typically discuss what the attorney knows about the evidence, the case facts, and expectations about what we will be doing for their case. Much of the time this includes graphic information in word and photos, which often make me feel ill and conflicted. These graphics don't make me question my beliefs about the death penalty; but role and responsibility in the justice process. When the victim is female my feelings intensify. As an activist for funding violence against women programs, I question my commitment to these women as well.

During the important first meeting or so, there are typically three activities to be accomplished: the attorneys introducing us to their client; explaining why we are a part of their case; and our beginning to collect personal history information. Oftentimes we get stuck on the second part, especially with the clients who are mentally retarded or unable to understand our conversation due to emotional problems or instability. This is where the question, "What are you doing here?" begins for us.

The question is asked of us by the client, his or her parents, siblings, family members, school teachers, counselors, physicians, ministers, the security guards at the jail, prison or courthouse, victim's family, co-defendants, the criminal investigators on the defense team and everyone else with whom we come into contact. It is a philosophical question when posed as such about the meaning of life. It is apropos in that it always gives me pause. The answer I want to flippantly give is "to save your life" or "to save so and so's life."

But, of course, it isn't that simple. After meeting with the defendant, sometimes for many hours, we begin our outside investigation, which includes interviews of family, friends and anyone else we deem relevant to the story and the detailed records collection. We request and hunt down every conceivable piece of paper we can think of based on what our client told us including the obvious records – birth, school, and medical. Our motivation is high, because we are seeking information to tell a detailed story - not unlike the one I'm telling here - to tell the story of our client's life for the jury so that it can consider, in detail, the mitigating factors and weigh them against the aggravating circumstances in a given case. This is not easy work for jurors either, after they've just found our client guilty of the most heinous of crimes. A client had the presumption of innocence until the jury found him/her guilty. Same courtroom, mostly the same players, and it is now a whole new ballgame. Should he/she live? After all, the jury only makes a recommendation to the court, leaving the judge to make any final decision. There is much to think about and process as we began to work a case.

As the record collection process proceeds, with all the hurdles one might expect we prepare to meet our client's parent (s). We call potential witnesses (a.k.a. family, friends) in advance and explain our role a bit on the phone so our visit isn't a complete surprise. However, most capital defendants are poor and come from poor families who do not have phones, requiring us to show up unannounced and unexpected. It is in these cases where we get the "What are you doing here?" question. We are white women visiting often predominantly black neighborhoods and we are often uninvited.

The question seems understandable to me. I am embarrassed but I was marshaled by our purpose: to save our client's life. It is nearly a mantra in my mind—a mantra that serves to put the actual homicide and victim's suffering out of my mind and heart. Thinking too long about the horrible deaths would be to make the job too difficult or impossible. I am fighting the good fight – against the injustice of class bias, racial bias, sexism, poor health care, hunger, war, television violence, alcoholism, child abuse, a seemingly indifferent education system and the like – the same problems that helped make it possible for murder to happen in the first place.

Death is Different

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of these people's involvement and willingness to share what they know in making our goal possible. Unlike some areas of social work practice where the social history is largely gleaned from an individual and perhaps some corresponding records or reports, the lay and expert witnesses who tell us what they know do so quite reluctantly. We are not just collecting information to support what we believe to be mitigating factors; we are telling the story of our client, which is often the story of the making of a killer. Each potential witness with whom we speak knows this, inherently, and that

makes their involvement that much more significant.

However, there are cases where our client's guilt is really in question. What happens when the evidence is entirely circumstantial and suspect as well, leading to the defense team's belief that the client is not guilty? The system in place now requires competent counsel to "prepare for the worst scenario" (a guilty verdict) even in cases where his or her client's guilt is in dispute. This is a heavy burden on defense counsel and the key reason why capital case attorneys refer to these cases as "death is different" (McNally, 1984). This burden requires them to expend energy toward the penalty phase, energy that would normally not be spent on anything but a rigorous defense of their client, their primary responsibility in non-death cases. In a capital case, winning usually means saving your client's life no matter how: plea bargain or life recommendation at trial. Still, this is difficult for attorneys who think of "winning" as a not-guilty verdict. The viewpoint of the defense counsel can make or break any mitigation work. It is of constant concern for me as it determines the level of support for the penalty phase work investigation I'm hired to do. Of course, in the background is always whether our client will receive the best defense and live.

The road to mitigating a death sentence is winding. Family members who don't want their loved one to die are sometimes forthcoming with information from the very first interview. But that is usually not the case. I generally spend a bit of time getting to know the family's genealogy; then I gradually move the interview to the family dynamics and role expectations. Every family has its secrets or information they would choose to keep private. The existence of the state's premeditated murder scheme (the state statute which allows for the death penalty) causes many of the issues to become public and that publicity often starts with our investigation (or, as seen by family, the interrogation).

Of course, the same is true even for the other potential lay witnesses such as friends, classmates, or coworkers. They may know of events that they would rather not disclose, and may not do so. Despite the role expectations of many professionals, they, too, are reluctant to disclose information readily, if at all. They experience concern that we will try to blame them for what happened and take away the responsibility of the defendant we are trying to learn about. They may also have relationships with the victims or their families and side with the prosecution. These are difficult interviews for they are seeking information, rather than judgment. Still, when the potential for a witness to go public is there, the burden is heavy – for us as well as for the witness. It is here, I believe, that we battle deep cultural notions of applying blame, guilt, shame, and responsibility and heap it on individuals who go astray. I think this happens for two reasons: social control of the large majority of citizens and a distance-creator for those who

refuse to or cannot see the interdependence of our society – where we all benefit from and hurt from the action and inaction of others. Either way, the road to punishment is made easier as they both keep us distant from each other, thus taking responsibility to its furthest points – death as retaliation and retribution.

Gaining the family's confidence is difficult because they know that any information they provide me will be considered for presentation at a trial and that they will have to live with the consequences of its becoming public. They know, despite what we talk about when we explain our role, that we intend to demonstrate that the client should be able to live because of child abuse, neglect, poverty, and a host of other issues. When viewed in the collective, these cases represent the public issues of today, as Mills (1959) argued. In those capital murder cases where it is known that the defendants were involved and competent counsel pursues mitigation assistance for trial, many of the problems experienced as merely private troubles arguably become manifested as public issues (e.g., murder) while providing an opportunity to make public those troubles experienced in social isolation (e.g. child abuse, alcoholism, domestic violence).

When interviewing the reluctant witnesses, I visit neighborhoods and many other settings, which I never experienced growing up, including rat-infested homes, predominantly black neighborhoods, and prisons. These witnesses each have their perspectives on my client's story. Of course, they have stories of their own which are interwoven with their reports of the interactions and experiences with my client. These stories belie the complex relationships that we each have through our social interaction. What is different about them, in part, is the likelihood of their becoming public through the trial and affecting, possibly permanently, relationships within and outside of families. Nevertheless, I move forward collecting stories and seeking to make sense of the near 40 stories heard about my client in a *typical* case. Forty stories of the long-term and short-term personal and professional relationships with each person wanting to help with varying levels of commitment and interest need to be sorted. Sometimes it is humbling to remember that even the baddest person touches many lives – beyond the monstrous acts with which he or she is legally charged. These perspectives to tell the whole truth about my client's life become and remain the consummate challenge.

Seeking, Granting, and Getting Forgiveness

In this process of social history/story development, I become very intimately involved with many details of the family's life. To counter some of the multiple perspectives, I ask the same or very similar questions in each interview, tailoring the interview when the relationship type or duration call for a change as well as cross-checking information contradicted by witnesses. They are stories of bad choices, child abuse and neglect, mental illness, disability, poverty, alcoholism and drug abuse, and unresponsive social institutions designed to aid us such as schools, hospitals, and churches. Where were the people who are supposed to care? What were they doing instead of paying attention to the children whose stories I'd come to tell?

Early in this work, I realized that I and my clients and their families had more in common than I ever expected. We differ, however, in that I have never acted violently or physically against another person; I witnessed enough of that and somehow I never turned on others in my fear and frustration. Thankfully, I had someone who provided me with patience and as unconditional love, my maternal grandmother, Ruth. Children experiencing family dysfunction should have someone who shows them the kind of consistent caring that I found in my grandmother. I realized this to its fullest one day while listening to the state's closing argument during the penalty phase of a trial against my client, Debra Brown. The

prosecutor argued that several of Debra's siblings experienced the same environment growing up and they did not become killers. Indeed, but he neglected to add that every sibling had someone - a relative, a teacher, a coach, or a minister - who treated them as special by spending time with them and valuing their personhood. Debra, for a variety of reasons, never found such a person to show a genuine interest. Rather, her mother's boyfriends, her brothers, and several male cousins molested or raped her and she was leery of male attention. One evening at a local nightclub she found herself falling in love with a man "because he looked at me like he could see me." This man, who himself was left in a dumpster as an infant, would soon beat, rape, and otherwise control her and later threaten her with her life if she did not participate in several murders with him. Fear of being murdered kept Debra in line and involved in several heinous crimes for which she was sentenced to die in two states.

The environment-did-not-affect-the-siblings argument touched me personally in that, while continuing in my own therapy and moving through the anger and rage against my parents, I came to understand the incredible significance of my grandmother's affection and attention. Indeed, it was so great it may well have saved my life and surely provided me with the strength to remain resilient. The physical violence in my home involved county sheriffs and ambulances at our house because people threatened each other with fists or guns or pushed people through large plate-glass windows or took a baseball bat to my car or took every item out of the kitchen cabinets to sort because I put a can of soup back in the cabinet with the label facing the wrong way. Violence and intimidation don't seem to need a fancy or engraved invitation to join a family and when escorted by alcohol, are quite damaging. I saw it in my family and I see it in others.

Though it was slow in coming, the defense team, when it worked well, was becoming like a family, people working together, valuing each other's roles and ideas towards a common goal – life. My family of origin made it possible for me to play a significant role in my new family. This new family was not without its arguments or strife. We would disagree on whether I was working for the attorneys or the client. Or I would argue about acting according to my Code of Ethics. I didn't always "win" these arguments but realized that the many evenings and early mornings of yelling and screaming and begging for someone to stop something was, strangely, paying off.

To deal with our many emotions arising from this work we used gallows humor, which served as an outlet for the ever-mounting tension as the deadlines approached. In fact, we joked about the word "deadlines" and wondered at the origination of the term. In one instance, we made jokes about the "Bingo case" as we learned that the parents would sell all of the family's belongings to get money for Bingo in the hopes of hitting it big for their large family of five children. We sang the "Bingo" song, all to mask our sadness and frustration that parents would make such severely poor life choices and that such choices ultimately played a role in a vicious crime.

Together, we worried about getting the records; how would the jurors be selected; would a witness show or say the same things on the stand as in private; would the guards permit an attorney room visit for the mitigation investigators; what would the victims say at the hearing. We remained concerned about the racial and class biases which, it seemed we could not adequately address in our presentation of information because of rules, expectations, or courtroom protocol. In fact, in many cases we wouldn't be there at all but for such bias..

Was my work, then, also about fighting class and race biases? I've had many clients and witnesses ask me what a white, educated (read middle class) woman is doing working in such a field – especially when the victim was female. They express suspicion as if I, an outsider by most defini-

tions, could not possibly represent any compassion on behalf of their loved one to such an unfeeling system. Thus, I look like the state's ticket to the electric chair when, in fact, nothing could be farther from the truth.

This suspicion and eventual trust, however limited, taught me about mercy and forgiveness - words I'd heard many defense counsel ask or beg for and I'd heard clients and their family members beg for the same – when they could muster the courage to do so. I've thought a lot about mothers begging for their children's lives from the witness stand, defendants asking that their life be spared, defense counsel begging for mercy for their client and "to not hold my client accountable for mistakes I may have engaged in here," I've imagined this begging from the jurors' point of view, by the victims begging for justice – either directly to the judge or through the prosecuting attorneys. The trials often seemed to come down to begging for justice (the purview of the victim) and begging for mercy (the purview of the defendant). I've heard those words in my sleep and they rock me with their power. The intensity of emotion it takes to ask to not be killed or to ask that someone be permitted to live is enormous. Imagine life taking such a strange turn that the same person, who couldn't ask for help from family or friends, now finds him or herself engaged in the ultimate asking – begging to be permitted to live. My own stomach would turn to mush as I listened and watched in horror the pain of the parents' and siblings' testifying and how their faces changed as they turned to directly look at the jurors and ask them to save their loved one's life. According to jurors I've interviewed following capital trials, listening to those requests was psychologically damaging to them whether or not they supported the death penalty when the trial began. I think the makers of such laws will need forgiveness and reconciliation one day when the vast damage of the system is understood by more thoughtful people and I hope people who think like mitigation specialists are there to help them.

There are so many parties involved in the aftermath of a murder and so many people who need to ask for forgiveness. Questions abound about who can or should forgive whom for wha, but only the obvious forgiveness relationship is spoken aloud – that between the victim (via the jurors) and the defendant. However, so many questions arise when the private troubles of families become owned by the community. Many relationships that co-exist, peacefully or not, should be named in writings such as this, for there is much healing needed from the capital murder trial, appellate, and execution process. Whether or not the defendant "shows remorse" is often the key issue presented in the media. I know my father never showed remorse and, while he never faced a criminal charge, he hurt many people in his wake. I know my mother never showed remorse and neither of them ever asked me for forgiveness. Their act of asking would have signaled that their troubles were not my fault. Had they asked for forgiveness, I would have understood I was not to blame.

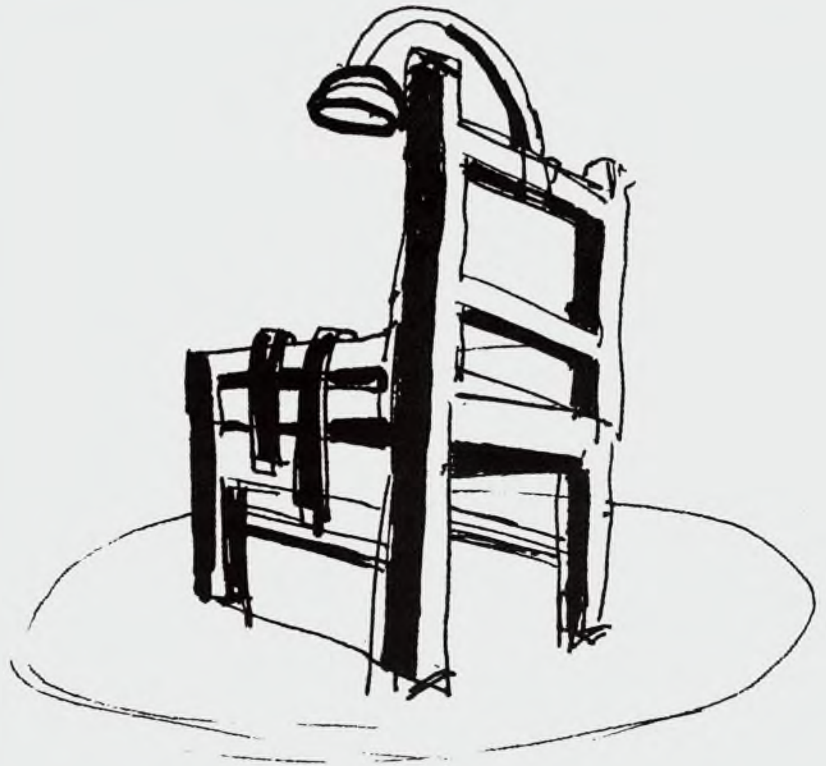
My "Work" Today

I was originally opposed to the death penalty because it seemed wrong for the state to take a life in order to show the value of life. Now, in addition to that, I am opposed to the death penalty because the pain of the trial and subsequent appellate processes seems rarely to result in the justice it seeks to provide. Rather, the initial act of violence has a ripple effect: on the many workers in the police, correctional, and court system; on the families of the defendants and the victims as well as the many people interviewed as even merely potential witnesses; the communities where the murders occur. This effect perpetuates the adversarial, competitive, and divisive beliefs contributing to the culture of violence in which we live. It seems it is cyclical with no definitive beginning or cause but can have a definitive end for the

very few numbers of those executed, especially in light of the numbers of murders each year (Coconis, 1994).

In 1999, there were more executions in the U.S. than any other year since the early 1960s. I attended my first execution, the first for Ohio in 32 years, of a "volunteer" named Wilford Berry who, though mentally ill, was executed because he expressed a wish to die and wanted to stop all the appeals in his case. I met Mr. Berry early in my work but he did not become a client per se. His team thought I might be able to talk to him about his wish to die. I was as unsuccessful as was the string of experts and family that followed me. It was a very cold, clear February night. Anear full moon set as a backdrop to the prison doors. Following a five-hour vigil, the execution occurred at 9 p.m. but took 20 minutes, 10 minutes longer than anticipated. Outside, victims' families were present, but they were outnumbered nearly 3 to 1 by opponents still hoping for mercy from the newly sworn-in governor, Bob Taft. It was reported that Governor Taft, a Catholic, was struggling with his decision but, in the end, carried out "the law of the state of Ohio." The crowd cheered when Mr. Berry's death was announced but soon a somber and peaceful mood overtook the police-lined crowd. There was tearful singing and prayer for all those involved in this case and for those people whose lives have been touched by violence.

I was able to follow this Ohio murder media extravaganza with the Journey of Hope, an event that focuses each year on a state that is likely to begin regular executions. The Journey of Hope members include mostly families of murdered people who are opposed to the death penalty. I volunteered in Memphis for that leg of the Tennessee journey last year, truly the most hopeful event I have ever attended. These people, deeply and directly touched by violence in their lives, found their way to forgiveness and beyond. It would be remarkable enough if they found room in their hearts to forgive their relatives' killers. But these people are actively involved in the



abolition of the death penalty, creating a community of their own. Their stories differ in the facts of each case and somewhat in their paths to forgiveness. Many of them cite religious values or insights as the root of the strength for forgiveness and some don't come to forgiveness until well after the person responsible has been convicted. Nevertheless, their message is unified: the death penalty does not promote healing and serves to further divide and maintain the pain. They want to create a world where violence is a thing of the past – whether it is by individual killers, such as those who affected their lives, or whether it is the government seeking the final retribution. To me, they are the true mitigation specialists in this broadening national drama.

Following my attendance at the execution, I thought I might stop doing this work; after all, I have a comfortable job teaching in a social work program in an abolition state, Michigan. However, in May, the Michigan legislature introduced legislation to reinstate the death penalty after 130 years of not having such a criminal penalty. So I

was motivated to act, in concert with many Journey of Hope members, against this legislation. As of this writing, the legislature has dropped this issue from its legislative rolls for now as more people have expressed a desire to maintain the abolition stance of the state than those who support the death penalty.

Recently, I accepted work as an expert for a case at the federal level of appeals with Debra Brown, mentioned earlier. This constitutes my twelfth year working with her and on her behalf. I've worked in two states on her various appellate cases and in Ohio we won her a commutation to a life sentence based on the battered women's syndrome and a sympathetic outgoing Democratic governor and his wife. Debra now faces the death penalty in Indiana where we hope to work to spare her life. Although she has 11 siblings, not one has ever written or visited, in part because of shame, in part because of financial resources, and in part because of the chaotic existence in which most of the family lives: in and out of jail or treatment or bad relationships; and in and out of condemned or substandard housing in neighborhoods filled with folks just like them. Her mother has died since we first met Debra and her father remains struggling with schizophrenia, an illness he's had for many years. There really is no one for Debra but Ken and me, and it reminds me of what I've heard from many clients – no one really paid attention to them until they came to jail facing this capital murder charge. I think of the Hallmark card television commercials and print ads where it seems everyone has someone who cares about them. But I have only to remember the souls on death row to remember that Hallmark and Kodak don't speak for every citizen's life experiences. Imagine the Kodak moment showing a child being beaten, a person being executed, the despair of isolation, a person trying to read a bus schedule who cannot. If we had such witnesses to problems, perhaps we wouldn't need social work.

What has always been clear to me is that social workers need to be involved in this issue because of the inequity in sentencing and what it represents about second chances. At the micro level of practice, it seems clear to me that if the money and time spent trying to execute this small number of people tried for capital murders each year were turned towards violence and alcohol prevention or intervention programs, we would likely reduce the number of killings. Imagine putting those millions of dollars into improving schools, providing families with the resources they need to be full participants in this society, providing adequate health care and meaningful, stable employment where racial discrimination does not prejudice police or correctional decisions. I've worked hard to eliminate the death penalty so that we can focus on preventing other violence in our lives. I've listened to clients and been changed by their sad and terrifying stories. I do not think this experience is limited to working with capital defendants. Rather, it is my sincere hope that all social workers will listen to their clients no matter what the setting or presenting problem with the same intensity and follow-through that I use with my clients. To do less is to ignore social work's purpose and denies that execution is not the only way to kill one's spirit. ❑

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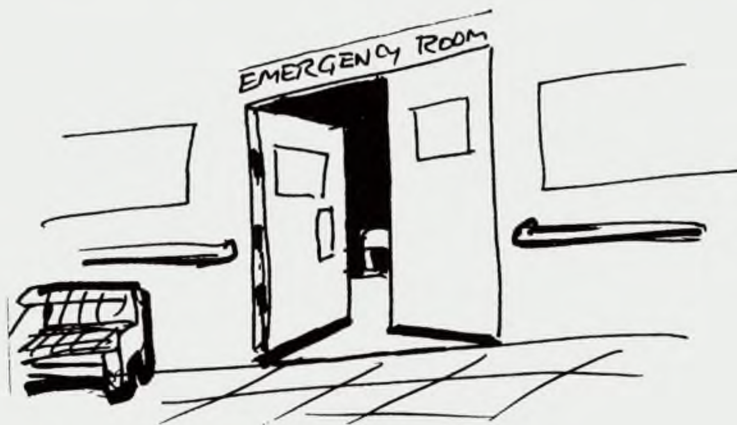
PURSUING VIOLENCE-PREVENTION STRATEGIES: A CASE FOR INDIVIDUAL VS. SOCIAL POLICY INTERVENTIONS

By Paul D. Juarez, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Family Medicine, Charles R. Drew University, Los Angeles

This narrative reflects on the author's experiences over the past fifteen years of attempting to integrate a personal and professional agenda that has focused on the prevention of violence. The traditional distinction made between casework and social policy is not an issue of focus, for the target of both is the individual and/or family. Rather, the difference is the set of tools one employs to effect change.

I hadn't been at the Medical Center but for a short time, when one of the physicians, whom I had come to know, asked me to come downstairs to the Emergency Room—he had something he wanted to show me. He took me into the isolation room that was used to constrain patients who were acting out and, in those days, it usually meant under the influence of PCP. Instead, there was the shape of a small figure, covered with a white sheet. Without saying a word, he pulled back the sheet to reveal the body of a 12-year-old Latino male with a through-and-through gunshot wound to the neck. He had been brought in two days before as a John Doe and remained there, his body still unclaimed. The image was haunting and, in retrospect, I suppose was perhaps the defining moment in my professional career, the significance of which, however, I wasn't to fully recognize until years later. In this isolation room, I had come face to face with the effects of violence. And looking at this young boy lying there, dead, I realized that, but for the grace of God it could have been me, or my child, or anyone else. To me this young boy was a clear sign that violence is not "just" a gang or a drug problem: it is a societal problem. Seeing this young dead boy, gave violence a face; it was no longer just an academic concern. I knew I had to do something about it.

I came to the King/Drew Medical Center in 1985 to pursue my personal and professional goals of working to improve the conditions for underserved populations. When I first came to Drew, I was told there were six areas that had a disproportionate



negative impact on the health of minority populations: cancer, cardio-vascular disease, diabetes, infant mortality, intentional injury, and substance abuse. I chose to work in the area of intentional injury. It may have had something to do with my previous work with juvenile offenders, but violence was an issue I saw as both a daunting challenge and an incredible opportunity for making a difference. I suppose it was the sort of big picture challenge I had set out in search of when I decided to leave the comforts of my job as a middle-school counselor—something, at the time, I had thought I wanted to do for the rest of my life—in order to return to get my doctorate in social policy. At that time, I had no idea the direction my career would take, only hoping that it was something through which I could really make a difference. At that time I was feeling that working with individuals and families wasn't enough. With little guidance, lots of energy, and a heady dose of naiveté, I set out on a personal mission to accomplish what I had

identified in my high school yearbook as my personal goal: to make lots of money and to save the world. Well, in hindsight, they were pretty lofty goals—in particular, the one about making lots of money—for someone committed to a career in the helping professions!

When I first started working at the King/Drew Medical Center, I had no specific expertise in medicine, health care, or violence, and certainly didn't know the first thing about teaching in a medical school. I mean, what was I going to teach a physician? Me, a young Mexican-American man from the Yakima Valley in eastern Washington state by way of a state college and before that, gasp, a community college. But the sheer act of having recently completed a doctoral program, I guess, makes you feel like you can accomplish just about anything and even if you can't certainly to be able to convince others that you can. Yet even with a graduate degree in social policy, I don't think I really understood how an individual goes about promoting social change. In retrospect, however, I can trace the elements of social policy change through the activities in which I was involved

When I first arrived at the medical center, I used to talk to physicians and nurses and support staff at the hospital, telling them that I was going to be working in the area of violence and how totally supportive everyone at the Medical Center seemed to be. Even in the mid-80's, everyone I talked to recognized violence as the defining and perhaps most perplexing social problem facing our inner city communities. From those initial efforts, I helped to establish an institutional Committee on Intentional Injury, composed of the Chairs of all the Departments and any other interested persons. We talked about whether there was anything we could do as health care professionals to minimize the prevalence and/or impact of violence in the community. What I didn't realize, and perhaps couldn't appreciate at the time, was that we were participating in the first steps of the process of social change - increasing our own knowledge and understanding of an issue. At that time, I didn't really think about it in terms of changing social policy but of identifying a common goal. Developing a common body of knowledge among different constituents is the key first critical step of changing social policy. While changing knowledge and understanding of an issue can occur in many different ways, it requires the pursuit of processes through which persons become engaged in a discourse about a social problem or issue to develop a common understanding of the problem and strategies for affecting change.

Initially, there was little consensus among the Intentional Injury committee members about what the problem was. So after unsuccessful efforts to define the nature of the problem, we decided to conduct a series of studies to better inform our conceptualization of the problem. We found that, while everyone thought they knew about the causes of violence, the truth was everyone's perceptions of violence was shaped by the constant media drumbeat of gangs and drugs, gangs and drugs, gangs and drugs. And the profile of patients seen in the Trauma Center certainly appeared to fit that explanation: young black and brown men shot, stabbed, and beaten up. So as we progressed with our discussions about violence, we unanimously decided that we would undertake a research project, interviewing patients who were admitted for trauma to find out how much of it was intentionally inflicted and what led to the altercations.

To begin the research, I applied for and was awarded a small institutional research grant, which paid for a group of rising second-year medical students whom I trained to interview patients, one summer, with the help of our Hospital Social Services Department. So every day, with the assistance of the Trauma Nurse Coordinator, we reviewed medical records, approached patients for consent to participate in a research project, and asked them about the nature of their injury and personal life experiences. With limited resources, we

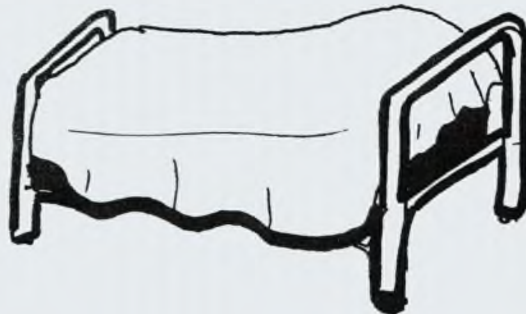
interviewed approximately 100 patients to find out more about how violence affected their lives. What we found through our research was that violence affects all ages, genders, and race/ethnicities, and that gangs and drugs accounted for only a small percentage of intentional injury admissions. Specifically, we found that over 50% of trauma center admissions, at the time of the study, were due to intentional injuries; and that firearms were the leading cause of injury, followed by cutting instruments and blunt trauma. Further results showed a very different profile from what the media had led us to expect. Far from being gang-and-drug-caused or related, most of the violence we saw was the result of an altercation between acquaintances: an argument, something offensive somebody said, a fight at the park or bar, a domestic dispute, etc. Only a small percentage of the trauma admissions were actually gang-or-drug (other than alcohol) related. We also found, as a direct result of the research process, that few individuals had been asked about the incident and that most of the patients admitted for intentional injuries were very open, almost eager, to talk about the incident that led to their admission, what for some had been a near-death experience. It wasn't that they didn't want to talk about their personal situations; it was that nobody had even bothered to ask.

At the conclusion of the research our understanding of the acts of violence that had led to hospitalization was clearer. However, there still was no consensus that we (i.e. health care professionals) were in a position to do anything about it. One day a senior research faculty member was providing a visitor from NIH a tour of the facility and was explaining what research different faculty members were doing. When he stopped in front of my office, not knowing I was inside, he informed the visitor that my interest was in preventing violence, and he made an off-handed comment that I thought that we were going to stop "them" from killing each other and being so violent. They both walked off laughing and making jokes about it. It was clear, however, they didn't understand! While my initial reaction was anger, this situation helped me understand two important points. First, it was evident that while health care professionals are in a position to identify and intervene with victims of violence and those at risk of victimization, there was no consensus that this was the role of the health care provider. Second, it also helped me understand the importance of keeping key decision-makers informed and to continually disseminate information through various means.

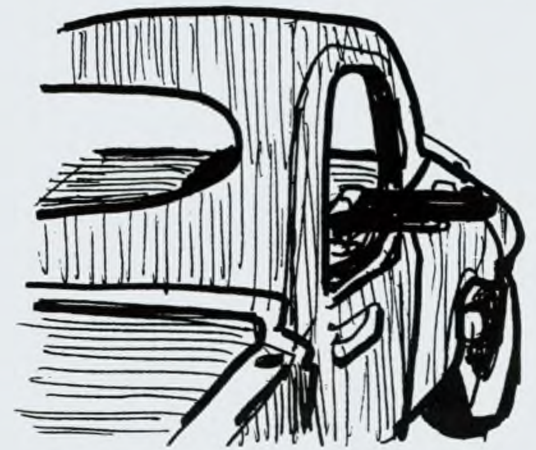
As part of carrying out the research project, I used to review the Trauma Registry in the Trauma Office on a daily basis. We did our daily identification of records and kept track of how many patients were admitted for the previous reporting period. Some days there would be as many as ten admissions and on weekends there could be more than twenty. One Monday morning around 8 a.m., I had gone straight to the Trauma Office to see how many victims of intentional injuries had been admitted over the weekend. What I experienced was a lesson not soon to be forgotten. When I got upstairs to the third floor, it was already crowded, something I hadn't seen before. Entire families were sitting up against the walls up and down the halls, some of them still asleep. I thought it peculiar that so many people were there in this condition on a Monday morning, so I asked the social worker what was going on. She looked at me and said, "It was a bad weekend...they're waiting." Silly me. I looked at her and asked, "Waiting for what?" She looked up and said,"This is overflow from the surgical ICU waiting room and they're all waiting to see if their loved ones are going to survive!" I was dumbfounded and embarrassed. I had

forgotten the humanity behind the numbers. But it was a lesson I learned well. I finally got it: the 12-year old Latino boy, these families, each of the numbers represented not only the loss of a human life but the shattering impact on families, communities, and our society. This was violence. It is an epidemic. This is what violence does. I went back to my office. I knew I had to do something more.

A few days later, after I had gotten over my initial embarrassment, I called the social worker to talk more about what I had witnessed. I asked her what she does when somebody doesn't survive. She told me there's not much her department can do because they were so understaffed and their primary responsibility was discharge planning. She further explained that if individual patients don't need assistance with their discharge (or if they don't leave the hospital—and by definition the deceased



don't), and/or if family members don't "fall out," then hospital social services doesn't usually get involved. I supposed I wasn't prepared for that answer either. I was speechless. Surely social workers would offer help. Not even. But as we talked, the social worker told me she did volunteer work in the community with a support group for the survivors of homicide victims. They met weekly at a church and invited me to visit one Saturday. Even though I thought I would be prepared for what I would see and hear, I wasn't. The grief was heart wrenching. But at the same time, the love and support offered to each other by those who



had experienced such a devastating loss was even more overwhelming.

I guess I had never really thought through the full scope of losing a loved one to homicide. First, there is the shock and grief of a sudden, unexplainable, and tragic loss: a parent, a son or daughter, an aunt or uncle, a close friend. Why? And in such a terrible violent manner. Some had witnessed their loved one being murdered. Some were horrific acts: a gunshot wound to the head, multiple gunshot wounds, internal bleeding, dying in their loved one's arms, multiple stab wounds to the body after being raped, perhaps in front of the children, and then there were the drive-by shootings. The pain, the guilt, the overwhelming grief one is left with: "If only I had…." replaying the scenario that led to the event in one's mind, over and over again. There was a mother who had asked her son to take the garbage out; another who had asked her daughter to run to the store to get something for her.

In the aftermath of the homicide are the burial, funeral arrangements, arrest, no arrest, trial, and so on. There's not enough evidence to charge him. He's going to get away with murder? Then there is the day-to-day impact. How are we going to make ends meet? I can't pay the rent, the car note, tuition. There are no groceries. I have three children and have never worked outside of the home. I only have a fourth grade education. I don't speak English. Will I get deported? What am I going to do? What about my other children? Where are we

going to live? And on and on. Lives turned upside down in a moment, for a lifetime. The pain never goes away; you just have to learn to live with it. Holidays, birthdays, special events, they all bring back a flood of emotions. The newest members of the support group are consoled by those whose loss has been tempered with time and by counseling and the support and compassion of those who truly understand what they were going through.

What do I do? I decided to get involved with two women with whom I now shared a common calling to do something to help those who had had a loved one murdered. We formed a non-profit agency to help, giving birth to the community-based agency: Loved Ones of Homicide Victims. We incorporated the efforts of a group of volunteers — including therapists and mothers who had experienced the tragedy of homicide to a loved one — wrote some grants, and started an agency that was born of the grief and the hopes of those who cared. As time went on, the agency expanded to provide a broad range of services including crisis intervention, emergency assistance, support groups, individual and family therapy, assistance with funeral and burial arrangements, court accompaniment, and in-service training for law enforcement, educators, and therapists. In addition, services now are provided both in English and Spanish and target different age groups including children, teens, and adults.

After several years of working with Loved Ones of Homicide Victims, though, I decided I needed to do more to help prevent the violence from occurring in the first place. One day, while having lunch with two public health colleagues, one from the Public Health Services of the Los Angeles County, Department of Health Services, and the other from the UCLA School of Public Health, we started talking about applying a public health approach to violence prevention. From that meeting we concurred that we could do something about violence. We each agreed to call a couple of friends/colleagues and meet to talk further about it. This is how the Violence Prevention Coalition of Greater Los Angeles (VPCLA) was formed: people wanting to do something, no plan, no big picture, just a shared concern and belief that something could be done.

At each meeting of this emerging Coalition, attendees were asked to bring others who were concerned about interpersonal violence: child abuse, domestic violence, elder abuse, gang violence, firearm violence, rape/sexual assault. Lively discussions ensued. Are all types of violence alike? What are the commonalities? The differences? It took us an entire year to agree on a common definition of violence! For the record, we identified violence as intentional, interpersonal, and physically injurious. We recognized that our definition was not all encompassing and that it excluded emotional outcomes of violence and self-destructive behavior and other social acts that can be construed as violence against entire populations. I fondly tell the story of a meeting where we were telling each other what our interests were and of our interest in violence. The public health official told the group that one of her roles with the Health Department was to do surveillance…and the representative from the District Attorney's office jumped up and down yelling: "You can't do surveillance…we do surveillance!" I knew then that there was a lot of work to be done.

By applying a public health model to violence, we were able to accomplish several tasks. First, we were able to break down a complex social issue into several smaller components of injury: agent (vector or mechanism of injury), host (victim or recipient of injury), and environment (physical and social). The public health approach provided a different way for identifying risk factors and conceptualizing interventions that target each of the three areas. Second, the public health approach relies on working collaboratively with various entities within a community. Establishing the VPCLA provided both the necessary structure and the flexibility to engage various agencies and individuals

with different organizational missions and funding streams to address the piece of the violence puzzle consistent with their own institutional mission and goals without being seen as a threat or competitor for scarce resources. Coalition partners were not asked to undertake activities that were not already within their scope of services and target populations. Instead, they were asked to work together on common challenges by sharing information and resources to help provide more comprehensive and coordinated services to individuals, families, and communities. Third, over the course of a few years, the Coalition has grown to serve as a clearinghouse to the community for distributing information about what agencies and communities are doing to prevent violence, linking agencies together, and linking communities with resources.

Operating since 1982, the VPCLA is now recognized locally, statewide, and nationally as a model Coalition, representative of a diverse, knowledgeable, and

committed constituency. The Coalition, made up of individuals who volunteer their time and efforts, is now composed of over 500 persons from across the county and serves as the regional nexus on issues relating to violence prevention. The Coalition provides the structure for coordinating many community-wide activities that reach across categorical authorities, geographic regions, and target populations served by most agencies. Broad activities coordinated by the VPCLA include maintaining an updated Calendar of Events; hosting bi-annual violence prevention conferences; distributing a regular violence prevention newsletter; maintaining a VPCLA web site with current job announcements, training sessions, etc.; sponsoring and co-sponsoring Violence Prevention marches; and conducting an annual Angel of Peace award ceremony, which recognizes the contributions of local and national leaders and youth who have contributed to the prevention of violence. In addition, it provides its members with information on legislative initiatives and policy analyses of the potential impact of those measures. Its countywide focus also has helped to expand the reach and influence of member agencies that may have local missions but have a lot to teach others about working with a specific population.

However, the public health model has a limited capacity for addressing complex social problems. Based on an infectious disease medical model, it is not as dynamic as the open systems model used in social work, which looks at the context and interactions of individuals, family, community, and society. Other challenges to collaboration across agencies include differences in theoretical/conceptual paradigms used, language used to describe the phenomenon observed, and organizational structures and hierarchies for addressing the identified problems. Integrating the public health model with an open systems model provides a conceptual approach for explaining the complex interactions between individuals, families, communities, and society. It provides us with a more effective approach in understanding the complexity of violence and the need for comprehensive theoretical explanations and dynamic interventions.

In addition, the process of educating different communities has required the establishment of mechanisms to maintain ongoing and iterative structures and processes, both within the community and among Coalition partners. We can thus further understand the dynamic relationships

of bio-psycho-social–economic-political forces that enable violence to occur, disseminate information about best practices, perform values clarification activities, and help others understand the importance of participating in strategies to effect social change through social policy. To accomplish this, we have fully embraced community education as a fundamental task of the Coalition and to create and maintain different forums.

The Coalition promotes community education among its membership by regularly bringing together an array of professional and lay communities to facilitate the pursuit of common objectives and shared values. For instance, the Coalition maintains an organizational structure that supports five standing committees, each of which focuses on broad, cross-cutting issues rather than narrow categories such as age, types of services offered, type of victims, etc. Decisions are made by an Executive Committee that is comprised of the chair and co-chair of each of the standing Committees and key others identified in the bylaws. The standing committees are community mobilization, health, education, policy, and data collection. Each committee is composed of diverse persons from different personal and professional backgrounds, geographic areas of the community, and interests and skills. In addition, the Coalition provides a "keynote" speaker at each of its quarterly Coalition meetings to foster common knowledge of different issues of interest to the membership. The bi-annual Violence Prevention Conference is attended by over 500 persons, including a significant number of attendees who are provided scholarships to cover expenses. It also hosts regular youth forums across the county to engage young people in a discourse on violence, seeks their ideas about what can be done to prevent it, and funds proposals submitted by youth groups to engage in violence-prevention activities.

The educational process about violence prevention also has been maintained at a community level. Changes in attitudes on these issues were necessary before elected officials were even willing to allow these issues onto the agenda for public debate. Thus the Coalition has engaged in various community-education activities over time: sponsoring/co-sponsoring a violence prevention campaign utilizing billboards; public service announcements; publishing and distributing a series of fact sheets; participating on talk and news shows; sending letters to the editors of local newspapers on different issues relating to firearms; and meeting regularly with elected officials and their staff to discuss issues such as banning the sale of Saturday night Specials and semi-automatic weapons, promoting firearm safety devices such as trigger locks and smart gun technology, restricting the purchase of firearms to one gun per month, and preventing the sale of firearms on county property.

These policy changes have only been made possible, however, as the result of sustained efforts to change traditional public attitudes, values, and beliefs on a range of issues: the sacrosanct status of "a man's home is his castle"; the role of children and women as subservient to the man of the house; the notion that the regulation of firearms is somehow unconstitutional; and attitudes towards homosexuality. These long-held cultural attitudes and beliefs had to be challenged and overcome in order to promote social policy changes that target child abuse, domestic violence, firearms, and hate crimes.

The constant pull between intervening at an individual/ family level vs. community/ social policy level still remains within me. To a large extent, the VPCLA has now become institutionalized, with a legitimate office in the Health Department, paid staff, and independent funding. As such, it has taken on a life of its own. I am, therefore, feeling the need to return to the unfinished challenges in my personal and professional life: working directly with troubled youth and young adults. Perhaps my involvement with a new community-based organization called Save Our Future will enable me the

opportunity to integrate my counseling/casework skills with my policy skills in addressing the needs of young ex-offenders. As I take on this new challenge, I can now draw upon the skills that I learned as a high school counselor, the knowledge of adolescent development and human behavior that I learned as a "houseparent" in a group home with juvenile offenders, the administrative and management skills that I learned in helping to establish a non-profit organization, and the organizational and policy skills that I learned working as part of a community-based coalition.

My involvement with Save Our Future has its roots back in the early 1990's when I was volunteering at Loved Ones of Homicide Victims. At that time, I met a couple of mothers, both of whom had lost children to homicide, who were true inspirations to me and to the many others who had the opportunity to work with them. One of these mothers had a second child who was murdered subsequently. I can't even let myself imagine the pain and heartache she has experienced. But she is an angel of peace. Instead of focusing on her own situation, or becoming angry with the world, this woman dedicated herself to working with juvenile offenders—likely the same individuals who may have been responsible for the death of her two children. She began to pour her energy into a group she started with the help of her husband and others dedicated to a similar cause: Save our Future. She recognized what many of us give lip service to but are not swayed from our day to day routines to do anything about: that our future is truly our youth. We can't cast them aside, or lock them up as many would have us do, or take away their dreams. They need us, just as we need them. The goal of Save Our Future is to help parolees prepare to find jobs using computers and internet technology. By teaching these young men and women how to develop an effective resume, to use email, and to do job searches, we hope to give them a stake and a vested interest in the computer/digital age and provide them with the means to define their own futures.

I suppose I've come full circle now as I become more involved working at an individual level with Save our Future. I once believed I had to choose how I wanted to devote my energies and focus my career - being involved at either an individual or a policy level. I now recognize that they are truly inseparable: that while you can make changes in policy, it still comes down to making changes at the individual level. An understanding of how the processes relate and when to pursue one avenue vs. the other, however, is a skill that has taken me twenty years to discover. So as I start again to help provide opportunities for individual growth and development to a population that has been long neglected by our society, I recognize that helping individuals and families occurs both through direct intervention and through changing social policy. And this time I'm better prepared as I have a fuller set of tools with which to work. ❑

At Home With Poor Women and Children: My Sabbatical at Bethany House

By Jennifer L. Soule, Ph.D., Department Chair, Social Work, Shepherd College, West Virginia

This author spent her sabbatical leave at a homeless shelter for women and children. In a joint endeavor with a photographer, they created a work that would help to dispel some of the myths about poor women by giving voice to their stories. She feels privileged to have witnessed their strengths, and to now be able to share this experience with others.

Sabbatical leave is the great plum of academic life; it almost makes up for the generally low salary. Due to my perpetual responsibility disorder, I did not take my first sabbatical until after 18 years of teaching and serving as the social work program director at Shepherd College. Like most faculty, I had dreams of a truly sabbatical experience; as in a time of rest and reflection. I would like to have spent some time hanging out in coffee shops, reading and writing poetry; but as faculty are to be productive at all times, I had to forego this dream. Yet I was eager to begin my adventure—one quite different from most sabbaticals and closer to the reality of non-academics.

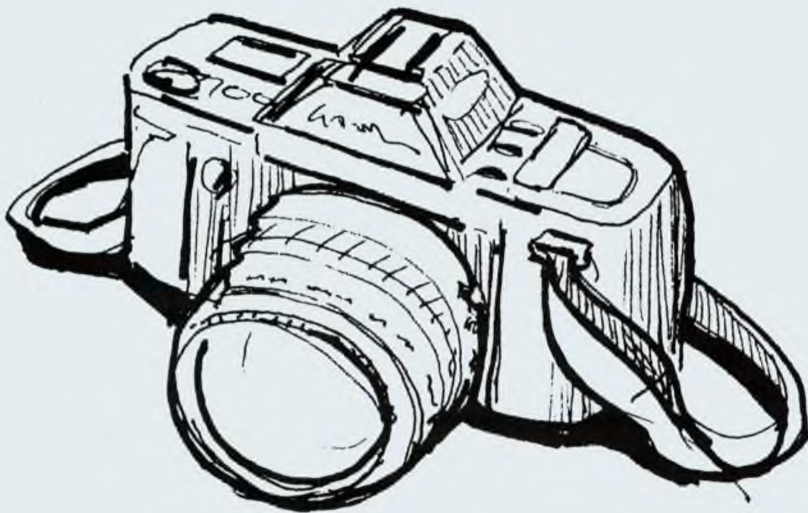
I chose to do something close to my heart. I returned to a practice setting with a vulnerable population—poor women and children in a homeless shelter: Bethany House. I believe that most social work academics go into the field out of love and compassion for the clients they serve. Thus, we need to revisit this source of motivation occasionally so we do not forget where we came from. It also brought home to me connections between my early professional commitments and my role as a big sister in a family in which some members remain impoverished. The intersection of our professional and private lives is often ignored in academic writing, but as a feminist, I believe there is validity in this connection, and I support reflective integration of the two. The fact that I come to social work from a less-than-affluent, activist, feminist background informs my practice and my teaching from a feminist-strengths perspective.

Although I have never been homeless, poverty is part of my family legacy. My father grew up during the Depression in western South Dakota, on the edge of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. As an adult, he worked hard as a shoe store manager to avoid such poverty for his own family, while my mother worked evening and weekends as a waitress. As the oldest of six children, I learned early that wealth is not equally distributed. From observing differences in how people lived, reading about people like Jane Addams, and listening to stories told by my parents and grandparents, I came to understand that poverty is not a personal failing but a reflection of a larger social reality. Of course, I did not use such words, but I had a felt sense.

I eventually obtained a master's degree and a doctorate degree in social work so that

I could focus on social and economic justice. I began as a VISTA volunteer in 1969 working to organize poor people into political units such as welfare-rights groups

and other activist organizations. This was one of the most memorable experiences of my life. I discovered that even though we have unequal resources and face different challenges, we all share the same human struggle to survive. More than anything else, I developed deep friendships and very much enjoyed working with poor people. Some of the time that I spent informally with people in their homes and neighborhoods would be perceived by many as just hanging out,' but this is how organizers learn about the community and its people. I liked this work.



Since then, I have spent nearly all of my adult years preparing undergraduate social work students to work with people who are socially or economically disadvantaged. During my sabbatical leave in the spring of 1998, I wanted to spend time with the people and problems I teach students to address. For personal and professional reasons, I am especially interested in the lives of working poor women and children.

I fear that because changes in social policies are often based on false images and myths, welfare "reform" may make these women's lives even more difficult. I wanted to do something that spoke to the dignity of the poor as real people who work hard. Social workers know this, but I hoped to take the message to a broader audience. Remembering the impact of social work pioneers who were also social photographers, my concerns led me to the Bethany House shelter and a joint book endeavor with photographer Benita Keller to document the lives of rural homeless women and their children.

Also from a working class background, Benita shares my interest in the lives of poor women and has photographed them in various settings, including Viet Nam and Africa. She is a documentary photographer as well as an adjunct instructor at Shepherd College and photo editor of the regional publication, Antietam Review. She has exhibited her work in New York and Washington, D.C.; has been accepted into the archives of the National Museum of Women in the Arts; has twice received the Ernest Haas award for the top 100 photographers nationwide; and was awarded a Maryland State Individual Artist Grant in 1997. Keller uses a 35mm camera with black-and-white film and a wide-angle lens to get close to her subjects and reveal their surroundings in order to capture intimate details and create visual metaphors.

In doing the project together, we respected one another's individual approaches and styles to bring together words and images and tell the story of the women at Bethany House as fully as possible. Although our main goal is publication of a book, art exhibitions and slide presentations have provided additional avenues of communicating our experiences at Bethany House. We wanted to help dispel the stereotypes that surround poor women and their children and, through their stories and experiences, to find the common human threads that connect us all. We were privileged to witness the daily lives of these women. A testament to the struggles and survival of rural homeless women, the Bethany House sabbatical project attaches faces and voices to the national statistics of women in poverty and reveals how the stereotypes associated with the word "homeless" mask the humanity of the poor. As the resilience of poor women and children emerges, we discover that to survive and

even laugh at insurmountable odds requires enormous strength. The women I met at Bethany House have what it takes.

In her excellent study of poor women in Minneapolis at the beginning of the century, Poor Women and Their Families: Hard Working Charity Cases, 1900-1930, Beverly Stadum (1992) describes how these women worked to survive. She tells of a Mrs. Nordheim, who wrote to the Associated Charities/Family Welfare Association about her plight, after a lifetime of struggle. What struck me about this book is that earlier in the century, this impoverished woman asked the charity workers to appreciate "what I done and struggled." (Stadum, 1992, p. xiii)

In order to do the project, Benita and I volunteered our services. By being at Bethany House on a regular basis, we were able to gain a good sense of the place and the people. My primary role was to facilitate the morning life-skills class, which is mandatory for all women who are not working or at other appointments. This was the heart and guts of the experience for me, and where I came to know the women; around the kitchen table at Bethany House. I want to share my experience by introducing you to the women who had such an impact on me, and by telling the story of our time together in a homeless shelter.

Problem: Rural Homelessness

Numerous statistics on poverty—presented in newspapers, on National Public Radio, during network news programs, and in thick government reports—reveal an increasingly serious situation for poor women and children. Many of the facts are now common knowledge. Over 50 percent of female-headed households in rural areas live below the poverty line; extreme poverty, lack of economic opportunity, and inadequate state and federal support place these families in the worst housing available. For women with partners, domestic violence heads the list of factors driving women and children out of their homes. As a result, in recent years, women with families have been the fastest growing segment of the homeless (Butler, 1997).

Homeless women and children in rural areas such as West Virginia remain less visible, are much less frequently studied, and face different concerns than their urban counterparts. They typically may have fewer problems with mental illness and substance abuse, higher levels of personal resourcefulness and informal helping networks, but at the same time, fewer formal structural supports such as jobs, transportation, and public funds.

Place: Bethany House

Bethany House, a shelter in West Virginia's eastern panhandle, provides emergency services to homeless women and children. Women who come to Bethany House find not only a home and food but also life-skill classes and case management. A part of the nonprofit organization Community Networks, Inc., under contract to the State of West Virginia, Bethany House has minimal funding and a small staff of less than ten workers. The number of residents averages between 10 and 15, with a maximum of 32. The 30-day limit assures that the shelter is a temporary place; a way station. Bethany House takes its name from the Hebrew word "Bethel," meaning House of God, a hallowed spot, or a chapel for Nonconformists. In many ways, the women and children who stay at Bethany House are nonconformists, as they do not fit the norms of society.[1] Due to circumstances beyond their control, they live outside of the American dream.

The house itself is plain and blends into the neighborhood. A sign on the door says, 'Knock loudly." Once inside the gray steel front door, you hear phones ringing, women talking, sometimes laughing, children playing and crying. A sense of the crowded chaos of poverty prevails. In the morning, women gather around a wooden kitchen table with children squirming on their laps or clamoring for attention, asking for one more piece of a jellyroll or more Toasted Oats.

The kitchen table is a central feature in the lives of women in the shelter, as it is with many women. Here, the Bethany House women not only eat meals but also attend classes, make crafts, and share their stories. As with many families, the kitchen table becomes a place of communion and learning from others, and those who pull up a chair are no longer strangers. The kitchen table, as in most homes, is a place to share love, warmth, laughter, sorrow, nourishment, and problems. We found all of these at Bethany House, as we learned of the strength of the human spirit to face adversity.

The women are all eager to leave the shelter and get places of their own, but they are also glad that when they needed help the shelter was there. Though the shelter's formal rules mandate a maximum residence of 30 days, the stay can be and often is extended for a number of reasons, and a few residents return from time to time. Given the difficult situations facing these women and their children, it is often not possible to resolve all of these problems in 30 days or even two or three months. Such a notion is even more ironic considering that the public often views the homeless through a lens of psycho-pathology, which suggests that the problems facing these women would take years to address.

Person: The Women

The women of Bethany House are trying to maintain a "balance-in-movement" as young mothers in their 20's and 30's. They are all part of the invisible rural poor. Often they are survivors of difficult situations—abandonment, addiction, and abuse. Like most low-income, working poor, Bethany House women work hard at factory or minimum-wage service jobs. They want the same things as everyone else: a home, a decent job, good food, someone to love. But more than anything, they want better lives for their children.

The individual women were the most important part of my sabbatical experience. They reminded me of my family members who have been only a short step away from homelessness. Most specifically, my sister Cindy who, working six days a week at two jobs in the fast food industry, made only $8,000 last year. She has trudged to work at 5 a.m. in snowdrifts so she could be home when her kids returned from school. But working has not made all the other problems with poverty go away. Her son quit school and made $9,000 working at a car wash. She lost food stamps because he was not in school, so that he could work and contribute to the household—but instead, he used his money to buy a Dodge Ram truck. Cindy is often threatened with eviction from public housing due to problems caused by her teenagers or her ex-husband. Like the women at Bethany House, she keeps on keeping on.

Tina: Escape from hellish adoptive home into jailbreak marriage

Tina, a young white woman with long brown hair and expressive eyes (24), lives in the shelter with her youngest daughter, Sandra, because "things were not working at home and I had no other place to go." She once won a poetry contest but could not

attend the awards ceremony because her husband didn't want to watch the kids. But now Tina is in the shelter with no job, no childcare, and no money.

This saga began early. She says, "I had a happy childhood until I was six, and then everything changed. My parents decided to get divorced, and neither of them wanted us kids so they gave us up for adoption." But her adoptive home was not a happy place for her. For example, when her adoptive mom was angry with her, "She would make me go downstairs in the basement and I was supposed to scream as loud as I possibly could: 'My real mom and dad hate me. That's why they gave me up.'"

Tina got married early—a jailbreak marriage so she could get out of a difficult place. Unfortunately, the husband she met at church drank a lot and worked little. Tina has often worked minimum wage jobs to support her three kids, but childcare was always a major problem. While at Bethany House, she got a factory job like many of the other residents and worked a swing shift from 2:30 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. This necessitates childcare for Sandra during these hours, and Tina must wake her in the middle of the night to take her back to the shelter. There is a haunting sadness in bags under the eyes of two-year-olds like Sandra, who have no bed of their own.

If her life had been different, Tina could have been a college student in one of my classes as easily as a factory worker. She is bright, a hard worker, and actually looks like a nontraditional-aged student. What she needs is assistance in pursuing broader interests.

Angie: Move from inner city to country

Angie, a petite 30-year-old African-American, describes herself as "athletic, independent, outgoing, mature, sensitive, and above all honest." During high school, she was a track star and a cheerleader. She moved to West Virginia from inner-city Philadelphia because she thought it would be a safe place for her beautiful children, Latasha, Latrice, LaNikka, and Maurice. She wanted them to be able to go outside and play instead of barricading themselves in a house to avoid gunshots and drug dealers. Her kids are well behaved, neatly dressed in donated clothes, playful, and friendly. They always bow their heads to say grace before meals. Angie describes the children's household chores and routine when she was working: "It was like this: come home, straighten up, change your clothes, fold your clothes, do your homework, go outside and play until six, come back in to help me set the table. And it worked, you know, it worked."

And it did work while Angie had two full-time factory jobs. But her eighty-hour-a-week work schedule and the responsibilities of making a home for her children finally proved too much for Angie: she became so ill she had to be hospitalized and lost her jobs. Angie said there was also a problem with her husband: "immaturity." So she ended up at Bethany House. It is extremely difficult to find housing for a family with four kids. As with many poor families, any kind of major setback—an injury, illness, childcare problems, or transportation difficulties—can wreak havoc.

Yet with all her own problems, she readily comforts and assists others. Her empathy skills are as well developed as those of many professional caretakers. One morning, she talks of seeing a child shivering at the bus stop and—no big deal—she gives him her hooded sweatshirt right off her back. That same day, she reads aloud to help an illiterate man who is doing volunteer work at the shelter. He appears to be embarrassed about not being able to read, but he smiles while Angie helps him. A natural leader, Angie is sought out by other women for advice on family problems. They listen as she speaks in her gentle, quiet voice.

Tiffany: Welfare poet

Tiffany, a 24-year-old white woman with Cherokee heritage, was told by her lawyer that she did not "seem like a home-

less woman." She is bright and articulate but never finished high school or obtained a GED. When I got to know her, she was struggling with significant legal problems. Yet she could also pass as a college student in her jeans and t-shirts. As I spent time with the women at Bethany House, it was clearly obvious that homeless women do not look different from other young women.

A talkative, tall, slender woman with light brown hair and hazel eyes, Tiffany is concerned about her appearance and weight, like many women, even though she is quite thin. Her life changed dramatically when she was arrested, charged by her husband with allegedly molesting her five-year-old son. The charges were later dismissed, but in the meantime she lost everything: custody of her three children, her home, and even her clothes.

I learned about what had happened and got a look at the social welfare system through Tiffany's eyes. Her experience with the system gave her extensive knowledge of procedures that she would share with others. Yet she says that she absolutely does not want to be a lawyer, judge, police officer, or Child Protective Services worker. She does not believe the system works: "It's a crazy system. Husband takes the kids away from me for something I never did. Just calls the cops. Crazy system. All I am is a mom who cares about her kids and loves them and wants them back, but I have a system that doesn't work. We all have a system that doesn't work, you know."

She says the CPS worker later told her she was sorry for what happened. The investigation does not appear to have been thorough or done by a trained social worker. According to Tiffany, it never came out that her husband was an alcoholic who beat her in front of her children when she was nine months pregnant. Tiffany also says that the therapist who saw her son did not think the abuse happened. And Tiffany believes the father told the child to say that it did. In a rural area, Tiffany was the outsider. That's difficult.

She likes to write poetry, and her poem, "Welfare Blues," was published in the nationwide newspaper Welfare Mothers after I submitted it. Although she does not get to see her kids often, they are the focal point of her life, and she wants what is best for them. "I want no drinkin'," she says. "I want no drugs, 'cause it is bad enough me smoking cigarettes. I want my kids in church. I want my kids in school. I want my kids learning the proper things. I don't want my kids knowing about condoms at five years old. I don't want them to worry about adult matters. I want them to worry about kid stuff. I don't want them to worry about what I have to worry about. And I talk to my kids all the time 'cause nobody talked to me."

Tiffany has tried various jobs including food service, but knows that this is not enough to live on. While at the shelter, Tiffany found work at one of the local industries finishing bathtubs on the second shift—not the work she would like to do. "I would like to be a nurse," she says. "I really like to help people."

Like so many women in the shelter, Tiffany has relied on her faith to carry her through the tough times. She says her beliefs started early. "Plain and simple," she says, "the first time I went to church, I was only a week old. So it started with my mom. She just put the root in me, and it grew from there. God took over. God made me never forget who He was. I pray every day. Only God got me through the past year."

Jennifer: Mountain Woman

Jennifer, 29, proud of her mountain and Cherokee heritage, has dark eyes that flash but keeps them covered with bangs "so no one can read my eyes." This tough/tender woman picks up an infant resident and glides across the shelter floor to the strains of Willie Nelson's "You Ought to Hear Me Cry" playing on the pink radio with its coat-hanger antenna. Missing her own children who are with her sister, she coos, "Fussy little white boy. You hold your head up real good."

She possesses a quick temper and an eagerness to please. She gets mad over what may appear to be minor insults (as in "she touched me") and can hit the door, break a hand, and not let on that she is in pain. Jennifer says she learned wrestling and karate from her father. She also leaps to drag out an antiquated typewriter to type a poem written by a shelter woman. She willingly helps fix cars or gives rides to others.

Jennifer likes to cook and tries to eat healthy foods; she exercises to keep her weight down. One Friday, she prepares a better-than-Chinese-carry-out stir-fry pork as part of a "cooking class." (Residents are not allowed in the kitchen unless it is for educational purposes.) She is quite pleased with the results, serves everyone, and watches their enjoyment.

Not a first-time resident, Jennifer knows the shelter well, and as she sees it, "You know the best thing about this place? We all got different personalities. Different cultures. Different backgrounds. The whole works. And let's put it this way: 98% of us get along. We put our troubles at the bottom of the list and support each other." Jennifer often shares with other residents advice she learned from her counselor: "Can you take care of it right now? No. Then don't worry about it. If you can't do anything about it right now, forget it."

Her life has been difficult, and she remembers some bad times. At one point, she sold $10,000 worth of tools to support her "drinkin' and druggin'." But now she works her program everyday; she is doing this in order to get her kids back.

She tells her story: "See, what it is…I been granted custody through the circuit court for my kids. When I was going for the divorce, he didn't want to leave me alone. So I had to put my kids in a safe place—with my sister. Now she is trying to take control of them, saying I'm an unfit mother because I had to do what I had to do." As for most women at the shelter, Jennifer's kids are central to her life. "I don't want nothing but my kids," she says. "They're the best thing that ever happened to me. The little man and the princess." Framed 8x10 glossy photos of them adorn her dresser.

Tammy: An "All American Family"

Tammy, 34 and the mother of three boys, Uriah and twins Loren and Carey, suddenly found herself without a place to live. Her first three days at the shelter she did not take off her green wool coat and cried most of the time because her children were not yet with her, though they did arrive shortly thereafter. Her children are well behaved, play well with other kids in the shelter, and adore their mom. They wanted a picture of all of them for the wall in their new home. They posed just like any other family--all smiles. Tammy says, "There are many beautiful things to love--above all the ugly. Despite the obstacles of life, you have to grin and bear it."

While she was in the shelter, Tammy read, went to the library, practiced her computer skills, and helped her kids with their homework. It is a handful. Uriah, the eldest, has a serious heart problem that requires a special Pritikin diet--not easy to afford on a limited budget. But by the end of her stay at Bethany House, Tammy was able to get a job as a secretary and was able to get on a waiting list for an apartment.

Tammy is like so many other women who have experienced family violence but who never really talk about it and just go on doing what they can. Her focus is taking care of her children. Tammy and the boys work well together as she tries to be the best mother she can while working full time.

Process: The Morning Class

The morning classes that I facilitated allowed me to engage in one of my favorite practice modalities—group work. I believe in this because it is in groups that we learn so much about ourselves and each other, beginning with that first important group—the family. Attention to the group experience remains one of the unique aspects of social work and part of the person-in-environment model.

This focus on the importance of the group also supports my feminist-strengths perspective. The feminist framework for social work practice outlined by Karen Haynes and Karen Holmes in An Invitation to Social Work (1994), delineates a foundation for social work practice: holistic, nondichotomous thinking—seeing the connections between individuals and their environments rather than seeing them as isolated parts; reconceptualized power, empowered clients; the idea that the personal is political, which stems from the consciousness raising groups of the women's movement; emphasis on relationship as central for meaning in one's life and as the core of social work; and the importance of renaming and reclaiming, which includes knowing and recognizing the significance of her-story (Haynes & Holmes, pp. 21-26).

When taught by the Bethany House staff, the groups are generally informational or educational and cover such topics as job interviews, parenting skills, and health issues. In leading my group discussions, I wanted the women to have a chance to explore their lives in a different way that might be personally empowering. I saw them as women who were individuals and worked with them as I would any women's group. I did not concentrate on the fact that they were currently women who had no other place to live. And in fact, they rarely mentioned being without a home. Because we wanted to be an integral part of the session, the photographer, Benita, and I often participated in the exercises.

The first session involved an exercise from Susan Goldsmith Wooldridge's book, poemcrazy: Freeing Your Life with Words (1996). We used movie-admission tickets to write words describing first ourselves, and then another set of words describing a female role model. No one used the word "homeless." Although problems with addiction, depression, abuse, illness, and poverty were represented, the dominant image was that of strong women who have had difficult lives but maintain hope and survive the best they can. The women portrayed themselves as "strong," "creative," "smart," "proud," "alive." We ended the exercise by writing a group poem that extolled the strengths of women.

All the sessions were not quite this wonderful; but they were positive experiences for all of us as a way of knowing each other as women around a kitchen table with stories that connect us. One of the liveliest sessions was the one in which we did an exercise on firsts from Susan Albert's book Writing from Life: Telling Your Soul's Story (1996). Tiffany's account of her first sexual experience had people howling because of the naivete. First friends were remembered fondly. Most women liked their first day of school.

Part of what emerged in the sessions was a more complete picture of women who are often stereotyped. It reaffirmed my belief in the importance of the group experience for breaking down barriers. The group sessions were often interrupted because the staff needed to talk with the women, residents had to leave for appointments, or kids needed diapers changed and bottles filled. But this is the nature of life in a shelter and also in large families—flexibility is the crucial element. Some of the interruptions were fun like the time a Willy Nelson song came on the radio and Jennifer began dancing with baby Jonathan in her arms. I kept the group sessions as loosely structured as possible because I wanted them to be a good experience of being at home around a kitchen table—everyday women sharing their lives.

I frequently read prose or poetry by writers such as Dorothy Allison, Alice Walker, or Maya Angelou at the beginning of sessions, and the women seemed to enjoy this. A favorite was Alice Walker's "Never Offer Your Heart to Someone who Eats Hearts." Poetry sometimes evolved out of these sessions. Jennifer and Tiffany often suggested that we take what was written and create a group poem. Jennifer typed the strong woman poem, which began "Yesterday I was betrayed, / but tomorrow I'll try to

be kind" and ended with the lines "Courage and strength can never be taken / away from you."

I did the Rorschach Values test with them, and what emerged was honesty as a core value that they seemed to live out in their lives. All the women insisted that people be honest with them, and they held themselves to the same strict standard. Benita and I left our personal belongings lying about the shelter unattended and did not worry about theft. This may strike some as unusual among a group of dispossessed and impoverished women, but there was trust at Bethany House.

At one point, I had them do an exercise from Julia Cameron's The Artist's Way (1992). They imagined they were at the store and could buy anything they wanted. Any store. Any items. No money limit. All the items chosen were practical ones, like furniture or, in Jennifer's case, tools. They were items that would be found in a working person's home. They were not extravagant, luxury items. This is a good exercise to demonstrate what people value. A home emerges as what is important to these women. Another primary value in all discussions was their children. I asked the women, "What is larger than you and keeps you going when times are rough?" The universal answer was "my kids." Tina confided that she would not be alive if it were not for her children.

Though we had first begun spending time at the shelter in February, by the time the weather warmed up in April, the women wanted to have more frequent breaks and spend more time smoking on the back porch. They insisted that we join them. It felt good being included in their private time, accepted and trusted. Yet while out there one day, I was acutely aware of the differences in our lives as I noticed my Volvo parked next to Jennifer's "yellow bomb."

The last day at the shelter on a lovely May 4th was an emotional time. I had the women make medicine bags as a termination ritual. Benita and I brought the bags and materials like stones, feathers, and beads. They were small leather bags with pieces of nature as a reminder of our time together. It felt right as a feminine act. No one wanted to talk of termination or another loss. But people rarely do, and in this case it was best to do the artwork and have a Chinese lunch that I brought in from the Peking Restaurant.

Conclusion

My sabbatical semester at Bethany House reinforced my feeling that social workers have a responsibility as advocates and as a part of society's conscience to share our knowledge of what poverty does to the body, mind, and soul. We need to take the message beyond the social work community so that we are not talking only to each other. That is why I wanted to do this project with a photographer—to reach more people, to allow them to see what we have seen. As social workers, we are indeed privileged to have known intimately the truths of so many by sharing in the details of their daily struggles. We can reach people with our words. But we can make the message even more powerful if we go beyond words and include faces that are now anonymous.

To date, Benita and I have exhibited at the Shepherd College art gallery, an installation that included photos, words written on the walls, a kitchen table, and a cabinet. We also presented a slide show and narration as part of Women's History Month and at the Conference on Rural Social Work in Salisbury, Maryland. All three events were well received. Some of the women from Bethany House attended the opening art reception in the Shepherd gallery. They were excited about seeing themselves and the children jumped with glee. I believe they were pleased that others saw the courage and dignity in their lives. Currently, we are at work on a book that we hope will bring the humanity of the Bethany House women to a larger public audience. In this way, as Mrs. Nordheim so humbly hoped at the beginning of this century, the public can "appreciate what [they] done and struggled" (Stadum, 1992).

I can see a century of struggle for poor women and children played out at Bethany House. At the turn of the last century, settlement houses addressed the plight of many immigrants. As we turn into the 21st century, I would like to see more homeless shelters operate with this model—hospitable places that provide classes, job skills, room, and board, as well as exposure to art, literature, and music. In this way, we will nourish not only the physical, but also the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual needs of the working poor.

Stepping through that gray steel door of Bethany House on that first cold February day, I had no idea that joining the homeless women of Bethany House would be such a homecoming for me. But as I spent time with these women, got to know them, became part of their lives, I realized that our true home is the center of our daily lives, and for me—in my family and in my work—poverty has lived at this center. In remembering my own personal legacy of poverty and in reconnecting professionally in the midst of my now-privileged life, I came home at Bethany House. ❑

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HONORING OUR DEAD BY BREAKING SILENCE: REMEMBERING THOSE WHO DIED FROM AIDS

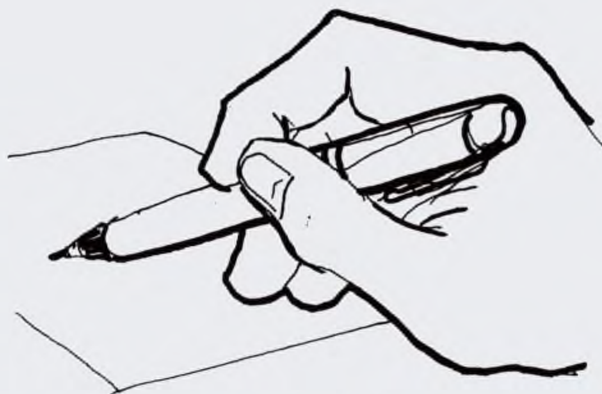
By Cynthia Cannon Poindexter, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Boston University School of Social Work

Reading about what Elie Wiesel witnessed during the Holocaust triggers in the author a flood of memories about people in her life who had died from AIDS. In this memorial to them, she strives to articulate how their lives impacted her own, professionally and personally.

THE TRIGGER

In August 1999 I was reading a book about the writings and impact of Professor Elie Wiesel[1] when I began to feel flooded with unwelcome memories, and to feel a crushing weight of personal grief. Elie Wiesel is, of course, a Jewish man who was liberated at the age of 16 from a Nazi concentration camp, and who has spent five decades keeping the Holocaust in front of us in the hope that this unique historical event is neither forgotten nor repeated. My family and I were not connected to those events, and I will therefore never be able to understand the experiences of those who were. How, then, could reading about the philosophy and mission of this Holocaust survivor overwhelm me with a sense of mourning? Although I was feeling great sadness for Mr. Wiesel, as well as for all those who were victimized, I was feeling something that was more personal as well, which was not related to the Holocaust.

I am a social worker in the HIV field. The memories that flooded me were all of people I had known who had died from AIDS. These flashbacks were all connected with getting a call that someone was dying; being in a hospital room with a seriously ill person; saying goodbye to people I cared about and respected. I wondered where these incidents, which were from six to twelve years old, were coming from, and why they were so vibrant to me now. I began to write them down, a few each evening, feeling frantic and compelled to get them out of my head, off my heart, and into the computer, where (I hoped) they would



no longer burden me so much. For several days I felt raw with grief. I told my closest friends simply that I had been reading about the Holocaust, and that I was writing about people who had died from AIDS; but I didn't feel able to say anything more specific to them about why I was emotionally overwhelmed.

I have struggled mightily with whether or not I should share these remembered stories and the trigger for them, and I still am not sure of the wisdom of doing so. I fear that by externalizing these memories I will seem to be self-absorbed, self-indulgent, melodramatic, unprofessional, or unnecessarily self-disclosing. I feel vulnerable about exposing my feelings and foibles. I am also afraid that I will not be able to communicate the power of these moments. The worst fear I have about disclosing the trigger for these memories is that someone who survived a concentration camp or whose family was murdered in one will think that I am equating that experience to the HIV epidemic. I am not comparing these two ongoing terrible situations in the

least. HIV is an epidemic that is unprecedented in my lifetime for its devastation and social ostracism, but it is *not* purposeful genocide. I do not mean to draw parallels between the Holocaust and the HIV epidemic; what I do mean to say is that reading about Professor Wiesel's ideas of storytelling as a way of honoring the dead precipitated for me some grief and some long hidden stories of my own.

Perhaps if I highlight some of the messages from this book about Professor Wiesel, quoting and paraphrasing the author, Robert McAfee Brown, it will help to explain the context and illuminate somewhat my response. Brown states that Wiesel's goal is to be a storyteller, a witness, a messenger, a testifier, and a transmitter of memory for those who can no longer speak for themselves. He says that Wiesel was silent for a decade after his release from the concentration camp because it was impossible to speak about the horror, and then began writing because it was impossible not to speak about it. Wiesel came to see silence as a betrayal of experience. Brown also says that narratives of memory should not be analyzed, classified, codified, and interpreted. Rather, tales should simply be heard, repeated, and responded to by telling other stories. Brown says that Wiesel's underlying hope is that memory is an antidote to indifference.

As I read this biography, I was particularly affected by Wiesel's commitment to tell the stories of people who have died so that they can live on within us, and so we do not forget them or their experiences. I'm sure that encountering this idea is what caused me to remember and write down the scenes that follow. It is fascinating to me that the vignettes which I felt compelled to write were not stories which I had written before or said out loud to anyone, including friends. I tell stories all the time, especially in HIV workshops, about the people I've known—but not these particular brief narratives. Their power was evidently such that I could not share them before, which is unlike me, who usually tells stories to anyone who will listen.

SO WHAT?

Before moving on to the vignettes I wrote during the few days that I was reading Brown's study of Wiesel's work, I want to raise the question of what all this has to do with professional helping. So I sometimes feel sad, so what? As I tried to decide whether it was all right to share these experiences, I asked myself that question many times. As most social workers are, I have always been careful of what the profession calls "boundaries," striving to be constantly aware of removing my own "stuff" from the work so that I can be more effective and more fully present for those who are asking for support. I have been known to say, "It's not about me," and I have fully believed that to be the case. I'm not at all suggesting that we disregard ethics, boundaries, objectivity, and being consumer-centered; I would be horrified at those suggestions. What I am prepared to say, however, is that after we have left the encounter or interview, after we have done our best to keep our biases out of the interaction, after we have put our own feelings aside so that we can do the difficult tasks we face, it is sometimes useful to acknowledge that our clients touch us, that our work is made better by our being reflective, and that we are not immune to bone-crunching grief just because we are paid professionals. I am also suggesting that it is sometimes appropriate to break our silence about the people who have touched us and taught us, and who can no longer tell their own stories. The reason to bear witness to the devastation of the HIV

epidemic is so people will be reminded that our world has paid and continues to pay a precious cost, and that the individuals who have died are missed and mourned. The question is not whether we as helpers will be saddened, will feel diminished by loss, and will sometimes feel too weighed down to continue. We most certainly will. The question is how we react and behave when that happens, how we are able to use the pain to enlighten our responses to others, how we are able to refresh ourselves in a way that brings meaning and longevity to our practice, and how we are able to present our memories so that people do not take those losses for granted. We can make our work a memorial to those who have died and a tribute to those who are struggling. We can see to it that our grief results in activism rather than burnout. We can break our silence about how the epidemic has personally affected us. That, I believe, is what telling the stories of the dead has to do with helping.

MY STORIES[2]

These are not the stories of other people; these are my stories. They were personally experienced, have been reconstructed, and are entirely my viewpoint. However, they are remembered and told in honor of the people who inspired me and taught me. I present these memories as they occurred to me, without explanation or analysis. What follow are eight vignettes concerning the deaths of friends and clients; the last story concerns only me. I regret that I cannot be an elegant, effective, and impassioned storyteller like Professor Wiesel is; these ghosts which haunt me deserve a better witness.

ESSIE[3]

I have no idea how a person's heart can fool her in the face of all evidence, but I do know that I was thoroughly convinced that Essie would not die. Could not die. What was I thinking? Well, I was thinking that she would never leave her children. They needed her. She was devoted to them. One of the children was HIV-infected. But where did I get the notion that death happened only to people who had nothing to live for? My head, my experience, my common sense told me otherwise. Except that day. All I knew that day as I sat by Essie's hospital bed was that she had always put her children first and that it was not possible that she would leave them. I was fairly new to HIV work, but that's no excuse and not really an explanation for my self-delusion. I'm amazed now that I think of it. I looked right at Essie, saw her struggling to breathe, saw the distant look in her eyes, and did not invite her to say anything real to me. I did her the terrible diservice of denying the obvious. I took her hand and, rather than saying goodbye or saying nothing, I said something insipid about hoping she was on her feet soon. Even more strnagely, I actually corrected one of the nurses who told me that they didn't expect Essie to make it. From my high horse I said, "People do recover from pneumonia, you know. She's a strong woman. She'll rally." The nurse let her incredulity show on her face. I wonder if she laughed at me after I left or just shook her head in disbelief.

When I arrived at the workshop I was to do in another town a few hours away, there was a message waiting for me from my supervisor, Bill, that Essie had died right after I left her. I felt so enormously stupid. Incredibly, I also felt somehow lied to; fooled. It took me a couple of days to realize that I had lied to myself, that's all.

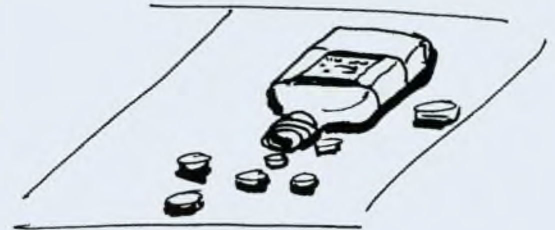
What Essie taught me by her death was profound: that HIV disease is more powerful than anyone's wishes, that death can win no matter what you have to live for. All of the romantic and naive notions that had been put into my head about illness and survival fled with that phone message.

I paced and fought tears as I was preparing to speak before a group of counselors. The topic, unbelievably, was bereavement. When I got to the hotel that evening after the workshop I called Bill and spoke to him briefly, trying to explain the disconnection between what I'd seen before me and what I

had chosen to believe. I felt that he was surprised by my having convinced myself that she wasn't going to die, but I could also tell that he understood it completely. I had another presentation in the morning, so I assured him that I'd get some rest and that I'd be fine. When I awoke the next morning, the message light on the phone in the motel room was lit. When I called the desk, a woman said, "Oh, yes, a "Bill" called. Around midnight. Said not to disturb you. The message is, 'I love you.'"

JASON

When Jason joined the support group he seemed confident, likable, easy going. He had a boyish, crooked, ready smile. What he was proudest of was his rising career as a restaurant manager. He defined himself as a hard worker and a good guy. One day he showed up at my office talkative and agitated after a sleepless night: after years of outstanding evaluations, he'd been suddenly fired from his job with no warning. He had been out sick the week before, and he feared that he had been let go because upper management suspected that he had AIDS. Through six months of our working with him on legal recourse to address the discrimination, he grew more and more hopeless and depressed. He stopped looking for another job. He talked about having no purpose. I realized that having been rejected long ago by his family, and not having a lover, his career had become his source of his self-identity and worth. He told me that without that job he was nothing. He started seeing a psychiatrist and taking antidepressants. When he showed up unexpectedly in my office a second time, he stood directly in front of my desk, looking down at me, saying nothing. I studied his face, feeling scared, and something made me say, "Jason, are you planning to kill yourself?" He silently nodded yes. My gut twisted. At my urging, using few words, he outlined his plan to take sleeping pills. He then agreed to hospitalization, again saying little. When he was discharged two weeks later, he took an overdose of sleeping pills on his second day at home and then called an ambulance. After that second discharge from the hospital, he hung himself in his living room. He was found and cut down by another member of the support group who had gone by to pick him up for a movie. Jason's suicide taught me that discrimination and injustice can kill.



ROBERT

When I met Robert, I was a little frightened by what I experienced as his hyperactive energy, fidgety mannerisms, and streetwise speech patterns. But very quickly all of that junk fell away, and when Robert got up to leave after an hour of chatting with me, we hugged. Rather, he earnestly, warmly, and quickly reached out to embrace me as he thanked me for my time, and I returned his hug without feeling any qualms or questions about appropriateness. He became a regular participant in the support group I facilitated, and I always looked forward to his remarkable humor and wisdom. One night he confronted me, asking this question not once but three times, shocking me and leaving me speechless: "CP, you come to group every week and listen to all of us, and I want to know how this epidemic is affecting *you.*"

Once I surprised myself and Bill, my boss, in a professional workshop by using my relationship with Robert as an example of how empathy and partnership could bridge seemingly insurmountable differences between helpers and consumers. I told those social workers and nurses that this man had taught me so much and said, "I never would have predicted when I met him

that I would come to love him so much." I saw Bill raise his eyebrows and heard his intake of breath; later he told me how moved he had been by this disclosure. The mutual regard went verbally unacknowledged between Robert and me for the next few years, until Robert told me in a telephone conversation late one Friday evening: "I've only trusted and loved two white people in my entire life. My doctor is one, and you're the other." I still count that as one of the most generous and touching things ever said to me. This is the biggest lesson he taught me, a lesson which now resides deep in my gut: barriers can be transcended.

Robert called me at home from his hospital bed on a Saturday morning: "CP, it's not good. Can you come see me?" I promised to visit that morning. When I hung up the phone, Donnie called to say that Jason had made a suicide attempt with pills and was back in the psychiatric hospital. I hung up and sat on my bed sobbing. I then called my friend Joseph, who was also a volunteer, to accompany me to see Robert and Jason.

When I entered his room, Robert began to talk incessantly, rapidly, seeming alarmingly manic. He started by saying that he knew he was in great danger but that he wanted to fight like hell to get well and go home. His lover Patricia was there as well, sitting by his bed in a chair and not talking much. I sat on the other side of the bed and Joseph stood at the foot of the bed. Ironically, during this visit I didn't feel connected to Robert. For the first time since we'd met I felt bewildered by him. I felt distanced by his outpouring of frantic words and helpless in the face of his panicked attempt to make sense of his life by talking about it nonstop. After an hour I arbitrarily decided to leave, not understanding what to do for Robert and feeling tearful and profoundly out of control.

In the hall Joseph hugged me while I cried a little. He asked if I was ready to go see Jason, and I reacted strongly. "No! I can't see someone who's trying to die after seeing someone who wants to live so much." I was aware of being enraged at Jason and at the same time felt that my reaction was unfair and unprofessional. I told myself that I would see both Jason and Robert later. I never saw either one of them again.

I was at my desk when Joseph called to say that Robert had died. I checked out how Joseph was reacting to the news, but I wouldn't respond to his questions about myself. I felt numb, frozen, without response. I hung up the phone and continued working on the grant I was writing. I told myself to keep working, that lots of people depended on me to keep working. About thirty minutes later Bill slouched in my doorway to ask me a question about the grant, but stopped mid-sentence to say, "Honey, what's wrong?" I didn't look at him as I answered "nothing." He stepped into the room and closed the door. "I want you to tell me." I said "nothing" again. He patiently waited out my silence, standing still in the middle of the room. Realizing that he was not going away, I sighed and said, "Robert died." Bill groaned and started to cry, which surprised me, because Bill hated to cry and rarely did.

As he sat down in a chair, rubbing his eyes, he simply said, "Ouch. That one hurts." I remember looking at him in disbelief, a little angry, but at what I didn't know. Then I started to cry. I guess I felt somehow that it was okay to fall apart now. Bill came around the desk, handed me a tissue, and held me for several minutes. When I quieted, he went back to the chair and we sat for a minute or two in silence. Then he said tentatively, "CP?" I looked up at him. "Your mascara's running." Then suddenly we were both giggling, covering our mouths and not wanting anyone to hear us. What a weird moment that was, but at the time it felt natural, intensely intimate. I know that our playfulness was coming out of our love for each other and not out of disrespect for Robert. I took a mirror out of my desk drawer and wiped away the mess. I handed him pages of the grant as he stood to leave. I stood up and we hugged a long time. I did not at the time notice, much less

reflect upon, the roller coaster nature of our days: grief, joy, work, friendship, anger, love, all inseparable and intertwined. We just carried on.

DONNIE

I had never known Donnie to question or confront anyone. He was a quiet, wizened, unshaven and unassuming man who disclosed very little about himself. He'd told me that he'd been a traveling carnival worker all of his life, and I figured that nothing rattled him. An hour after Jason's memorial service, he was intense and intent as he sat in the chair in front of my desk, still wearing the suit he'd worn to the funeral home. With an animation and sense of purpose, which I'd never seen in him before, he got right to the point and said his piece all at once. "CP, I need to understand why you didn't go to Jason's funeral. Robert's either. I'm asking because I'm afraid that you won't go to mine." I was stunned. But I did not feel attacked or invaded; I felt trusted and honored. I considered for a minute all of the deflections and reflections that I could offer him, and then I decided to be as simple and direct as he had been. "Donnie, I don't go to funerals at all. I haven't been to one in 20 years. They don't comfort me. I probably won't go to your funeral, but that's not because I don't care about you. It's because I remember people privately, in my own way, alone." He seemed to be taking this in for a minute. He then put his hands on his knees, nodded, said, "Thank you for telling me that." Then he smiled at me and left. Donnie had no formal education, was not someone I would have labeled a great communicator, and was not especially forthcoming about his own thoughts and feelings. Yet this brief conversation was deeply meaningful to me and taught me more about congruence and self-disclosure as a helper than any other I've had before or since. It taught me to honor questions and to only offer truth in return.

About a year later I got the call that Donnie was unconscious and dying. I left the office immediately and drove to the hospital. When I walked into his room, I saw that he was sleeping with his eyes open, which is a very bad sign. I looked at his ex-wife and his adolescent daughter; his daughter had tears in her eyes; his ex-wife shook her head slowly; none of us spoke. I went to Donnie's bed, lowered the rail, listened to his labored breathing, and began stroking his forehead. I was shocked when my touch actually roused him. Unbelievably, his eyes focused on my face. I continued to stroke his face and head while he stared at my face. It was unclear to me if he would be able to hear me, but I said it anyway. "I love you, Donnie." I'll never forget the next moment, as startling as it was moving. Once again, he got right to the point. Donnie answered clearly, "I love you too, CP," and then fell into his unfocused, eye-opened, panting unconscious state again. I stood there for a moment, feeling like I'd just received something magical; an incredible gift. I left the room after a few more minutes. He died an hour later.

MARK

It happened in the usual way: someone called me to say that he was in the hospital, not expected to live through the day. Dying so often grabbed people quickly, I'd found; the last battle with HIV sometimes came completely without warning. It always seemed impossible to me to be prepared for anything. When I entered Mark's room, I saw that Frank was on the far side of the bed, facing the door, crying silently. I was surprised; I hadn't realized that they knew each other. I wasn't sure that Frank would remember who I was. He had seen me only in the context of being Bill's friend or Joseph's friend; he was friends with both of them. He looked up and said quietly, "Hey, CP, come on in." I nodded to him, pulled a chair to the opposite side of the bed, and sat down without saying anything. Mark was clearly unaware of both of us. I listened to Mark's loud, arrhythmic breathing, hearing the congestion in his lungs. I reached up to stroke his face, which was very hot. I felt so very tired of this. Strange, but I didn't

realize that I was on the verge of tears until I actually started crying. I was embarrassed to be crying in front of someone I didn't know well, someone who would probably expect me to be "professional," but Frank just smiled at me in sympathy. For several minutes I sat with my eyes closed, holding Mark's hand. The first words I spoke in that room were to Mark as I kissed his forehead when I stood up to leave and said very quietly: "Goodbye, Buddy." I jumped when Frank immediately said loudly and with energy, "DON'T tell him goodbye! How DARE you give up on him!" Now I was concerned about having offended Frank and was a little taken aback by the strength of his anger. He could have interpreted what I said in a variety of ways, I suppose. I just said, "I'm really sorry, Frank." Then I turned and left.

FRANK

I was very surprised when Frank started calling me. He had always told his friends that he wasn't interested in getting social services, that he was fine. Now he was getting sick and was willing to have long telephone conversations with me about his fears of being incapacitated. Very quickly he became confined to wheelchair and bed. He was wasting and had become incontinent. His ex-lover and mother moved in with him. But Frank issued the order that they were the only two people who would be allowed to see him from here on out. For the last six months of his life, he didn't waiver from that demand. He continued to talk with me freely on by phone, and would give me permission to come over to his house, but I would spend the time downstairs in the living room talking with his mother while he rested or slept upstairs. Each time she would go and ask him if I could come up, and each time the answer was no. This was the consistent answer for his friends as well. He was clear about his reasons: "I want everyone to remember me the way I was." Unreasonably, I felt like I was letting down Bill and Joseph somehow by not being able to check on Frank myself. His friends were hurt and I was frustrated, but he was steadfast. There would be no goodbye scenes with visitors. I knew that his decision to isolate himself had nothing to do with me, but occasionally I would remember his enraged reaction to my telling Mark goodbye, and I would wonder.

LIZ

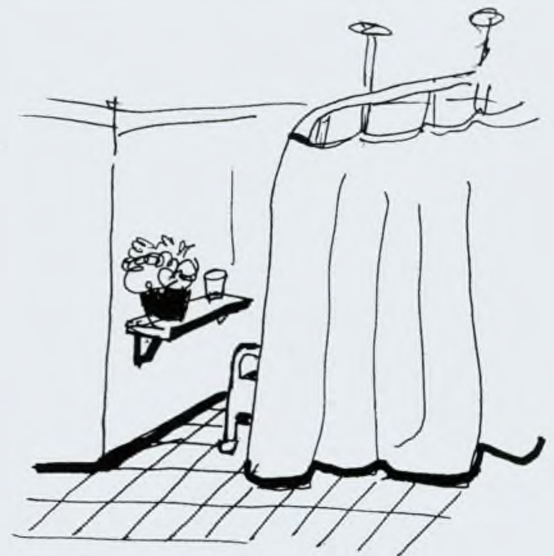
When I visited my friend Liz at home in early 1993, I was horrified. I'm using that word deliberately; it's no exaggeration. She was unchanged—still effervescent, funny, a good listener, exuding a warm happy love for her family and friends—but her petite body was unrecognizable. Her spine had become terribly twisted, and she was bent almost double at the waist; her arms and hands shook uncontrollably; she shuffled rather than walked. Her body had become so deformed that she had to sit down to make eye contact with me. I worked hard not to show the immense shock, sadness, and fear that I felt. I tried to allow her to set the tone of the visit, which meant that she asked me about myself, Bill, the agency, the advisory council (which she'd helped me form several years ago). She laughed with genuine joy as she talked about her two children and her husband, took great pleasure in showing me in her new bird book pictures of the species she'd spotted at the bird feeders that her husband had hung on her deck for her. She did not skirt around her terrifying health change—she expressed great regret at not being able to complete her residency as an internist—but incredibly, she did not seem bitter or frightened.

Through the years that I'd worked with her and done presentations with her, she'd always been clear, honest, and articulate about her reactions and feelings, privately and publicly, so I knew that she was not prone to pretending. She didn't usually greet adversity passively either, evidenced by her having to threaten a lawsuit when the medical school tried to expel her for having HIV. As much as her physical appearance threw me, I was equally baffled by her obvious serenity. I don't know how to say

this without sounding either melodramatic or trite, but Liz seemed to me to glow with peace, joy, and inner spirit. I felt like I was in the presence of some kind of transcendent being. At the same time I was so very sad. Liz saw that, I think, because suddenly she put her hands on my forearm and said, "Sweetie, I'm okay with this. I really am. I know what's happening. Don't be sad." I thought it would be a challenge to hug her because she couldn't straighten her spine, but she knew what to do: she held me tight around the waist and patted my back.

This was the only situation that I can remember when I didn't tell Bill the whole truth. I did not tell him anything about how Liz looked. I did not want him to know that HIV could do that to a person's body. I knew that he loved Liz, and I knew that he was planning to go see her, and I couldn't stand the thought of his having to confront her destroyed neurological system and perhaps realize that he could face the same future. It's not that I really thought that he or anyone else could get like this; it's just that I didn't want him to witness firsthand what this virus had the potential to do to him or anyone else. The only thing I said to him about my visit with Liz was, "Don't go see her." I said it emphatically and without explanation. He knew I meant it, and he looked frightened. And he didn't go see her. I felt good that I'd spared him that visceral fear, that terrifying sight. I'm ashamed in retrospect that I did this; why wasn't I thinking of the pleasure and comfort that Liz would get from seeing him? Why wasn't I thinking that perhaps they needed to say goodbye? Why wasn't I thinking that Bill could feel blessed in her soothing presence, inspired by her courage? I was just single minded in my desire to protect him. He went to her funeral; I didn't.

A few months after her death I witnessed another HIV-induced neurological horror—this time far worse than Liz's—and this time the twisted, ravaged body was Bill's.



BILL

This incident happened on one of the nights in mid October 1993 when I was alone with Bill in the hospital room. It was his first hospitalization; he was rapidly deteriorating from symptoms that no one understood. The doctors were still trying to find a combination of narcotics which would lessen his pain, and nothing was yet working. Bill was trying to tolerate bravely wave after wave of terrifying, horrifying, gripping muscle spasms, accompanied by the feeling that his nerve endings were on fire. Anyone observing these spasms could see the ripples in his muscles, the contractions and twists were visible just under his skin, and sometimes I would see the attack coming before Bill would allow a cry or scream to escape his lips. We tried to joke once about this being like being in labor, but the joke fell flat; this had no end, nothing good could or would come of it; no one had seen this before and no one knew how to make him comfortable. Whenever I would see an attack starting, I would scramble up into the bed with him and start frantically massaging his legs, arms, shoulders, anything to try to ease the clutching of his body. So many parts of his body would be turning against him at one time that my hands would race over him as he requested that I massage first one place then another: here, no here, no there. I would feel utterly helpless, to the

roots of my spirit. I would whisper things like "deep breaths, Honey," "open your hands, Sweetie," "go ahead and scream." Hours and hours and hours of this. He was weak, exhausted, tearful, trying not to dread whatever was coming. Was I feeling demolished out of empathy for Bill, or because of my own labor and emotional strain, or both? When the spasms would stop, sometimes he would say things like, "Go on home, Honey. You have to work tomorrow." Most of the time I wouldn't answer that with words. A couple of times I said something like, "I can't leave until I know you can sleep." Once I made the joke: "Oh, don't worry about it; I have a really understanding boss." From the pit of his utter exhaustion, he chuckled and then choked at that.

Somewhere between midnight and one—the space between spasms had been just long enough to lull us into the hope that they were over— I saw his feet begin to curl back, his knees suddenly bend, his back arch, his arms go suddenly rigid by his sides. I quickly put my right arm under his neck, and my left hand flat on his chest, and got close to him, holding him up a little. All of a sudden it felt to me that I just couldn't stand it anymore; that the waves of pain were climbing my soul, and this time as the gripping ripples hit him I threw my head back and cried out as pent up tears escaped. And here's what was in my mind, as clearly as if I were speaking it aloud: "Stop it! Take me instead." I was asking whatever capricious force was in control of the universe to substitute me for Bill. Me, a solid, unshakable atheist for over two decades, prayed. I prayed: "Let me feel this pain instead of Bill." This was my only thought, a pinpointed focus, and for a split second I wasn't sure that I hadn't said these words out loud with my sobs. "Please. Take me. Leave him alone. Leave. Him. Alone."

Then it was over. That particular wave of spasms, his cries, my sobs, and my prayer. It felt like there was profound, intense silence in the room. There were no sounds coming from the halls either. Stillness. But stillness which contained no peace. Stillness which was the aftermath of terror. I heard nothing but Bill's panting. Without speaking I wiped the tears from his cheeks [since he couldn't move his limbs himself], settled him back on his pillows, repositioned his arms and legs, and absentmindedly held his left hand, which no longer had any feeling in it.

I didn't realize it right then, but my life had just been changed. Forever. How like a cliche that sounds. But sometimes we do experience defining moments, split seconds when something shifts so radically that the previous normal state is no longer attainable. Now, as I write this, almost six years after this incident, I am tearful again and feeling again the truth of it. I was never to be or feel the same. For a few seconds there, with all my heart and mind and will, I had fervently wanted to die so that my best friend would not be violently abused any longer. This feeling was far different from a suicidal impulse; this overwhelming desire was not battle fatigue or being in any way ungrateful about living. Bill had taught me over the past few years to be profoundly grateful for the gift of life. I have no enlightening words for this event; it's a tale that can't be told.

This incident was a snapshot in an ongoing movie: my witnessing and feeling the unspeakable demise of a soul mate, a friend who was dearer to me than anyone else before or since, who had been a mentor I almost worshiped in my admiration. And this is the fact that six weeks later literally changed my life: I survived and he didn't. I entered territory where I had no passport: the holy ground of suffering, undiagnosed sickness, freezing fear, uncontrollable pain, unspeakable humiliation. And then I came out of this forest and Bill didn't.

Each day since then I have been consciously aware, at least once during the day, that being alive is a random, capricious situation that I didn't earn and that would be withdrawn at any time. It's an undeserved gift. All I can do with this awareness is to try and behave so that Bill would be proud

of me. To struggle to find ways to give witness to the lives lost, and to make my work a memorial to Bill and all the others I knew, cared about, and watched die. Yet these are goals which can't actually be fully accomplished. I am unworthy of being their translator; I don't have the skills or the fortitude to be their vessel. I ask myself frequently: for what reason was my life spared? The only thing that is ever clear to me is that I have a life and they no longer do; what that really means, I have no clues.

ME

This incident happened in the summer of 1994. Bill had died the previous Thanksgiving, I was trying to do his job and mine, and I had already made plans to leave the agency and the state. I wanted nothing more than to escape from the emotional pain I was living with daily.

I was in a meeting. I had been appointed to a statewide HIV-prevention planning group of 25 members and had quickly become utterly disgusted with the slow committee process, enraged that the infighting was—in my opinion—costing lives as we argued. An outside facilitator had been called in to take us through a weekend retreat so that we could get along well enough to write a statewide HIV-prevention plan. When this incident happened we were in the introductory process; approximately 30 people were sitting at tables in a rectangle, saying their names and what brought them to this work. For some reason that Saturday morning I was feeling grief as if it were physical weight. It felt like sitting in a world with suddenly extra gravity; I felt that I was being pulled down in the metal folding chair. Throughout the introductions (which seemed obscenely cheerful to me) I was looking down, unmoving. I am not aware of feeling the burden of the epidemic as profoundly, before or since, as I was that day. My mind was saturated with memories of the scores of people whom I had cared about over the last eight years who were now dead. I remember realizing that morning that it felt like my insides had shriveled up a while ago and I hadn't acknowledged it until just then. I felt physically flattened. My sadness was profound; it was both specific and general; it felt unbearable. I couldn't listen to any of the introductions; I was unwillingly reviewing the march of humans—children, teenagers, men, women; faces of all conceivable hues; wasting, feverish bodies; pleading, sad, scared eyes. And over all of them was Bill, my heart. I was feeling utterly devastated and hopeless.

A couple of times I became vaguely aware of the consultant, Moss, sitting beside me to my left, and finally I realized with surprise that he was sitting as motionless as I was. He wasn't even looking at the people who were introducing themselves. I guess that because I was sitting beside him and we were introducing ourselves in order in a circle, I ended up being the last to speak. I remember the effort it took for me to rouse myself and pull myself forward and engage my voice when I realized that everyone was looking at me. I felt uncomfortable with the attention, but at the same time I didn't really care. My friend Michael (he's now dead from AIDS too) was sitting to my right, and he put his hand on my right arm as I leaned forward with my elbows propped on the table. What I said, quietly and slowly, was very close to exactly this: "I've been in the HIV field for eight years. During that time I've experienced the deaths of about 300 people I cared about...clients, volunteers, board members, friends. Recently the man who was my best friend, my teacher, my boss, died. His death made me realize that I can't do this anymore. I'm moving to Chicago to go school." Even though the group members had to be surprised by that last announcement, I noticed no movement in the room. I felt at the time as if I had accidentally frozen everyone. There was a fairly long silence after I stopped talking, but I don't think that anyone thought that I was going to say anything else. They were all waiting on Moss. Then he cleared his voice, sat up, looked at his folded hands, and turned his head to me. What he said was very close to exactly this: "When you were

speaking, I was having a flashback. Post-trauma stuff. I was back in Vietnam. I was smelling burning human bodies. A pile of corpses, burning." He paused for a few moments, looked out into the room, and continued by saying that he'd been very aware of my stillness and my grief throughout the introductions, and it wasn't until I spoke that he'd understood the reason for my sad energy. He told the group that he'd just now made a visceral connection between his war experiences and how others experienced AIDS. And right then I had absolutely no vision of how I was going to leave that room and go on.

CODA

What happened next? I did indeed go to Chicago for a doctorate and am now teaching social work at Boston University and doing as much HIV advocacy and education as I can. I am still struggling, as do all HIV practitioners, with how to do a modicum of self-care while the epidemic rages on. But I learned firsthand that burn-out is temporary and survivable, a vital lessen for social workers and one that we don't communicate often enough.

Originally this article ended with my sitting unnaturally still in that committee room, realizing the depth of my trauma response and my despair at not finding the strength to go on. I didn't think I had anything else to say about grief, memory, and honoring the dead. But when the article was accepted, the reviewers and editor wanted me to add an end piece reflecting on where I am now and what I think and feel about these memories. Surviving burnout is one piece of this coda; the role of memory is another.

After I wrote this article in August 1999, Professor Wiesel graciously allowed me to audit his course on the literature of memory and reconciliation. During the fall semester, week after week I sat in this class, in awe of the horrors which human beings are able to survive and deeply moved by reading testimonies in which authors strive to give testimony to keep the memory of the dead alive. It was an extremely disturbing yet uplifting experience. I was constantly shocked and amazed at how cruel life is and how resilient the human spirit can be. Through this process my commitment to attempting to lift up the stories of this epidemic intensified as well. Upon learning that this small memoir would appear in print, I felt a confusing mixture of anxiety and relief: anxiety that I had not done justice to the memory of these individuals, and relief that someone else might read of their worthy lives and how deeply they had affected me. Storytelling is therapeutic, even while it leaves us feeling exposed.

I strive each day to make my work a memorial to the people I've known who died from AIDS. It's a burden, but it's also an honor. Sometimes friends and colleagues ask me what keeps me going, but I don't always tell them this raw truth: that I carry within me the memory of scores of souls who inspired and taught me as they faced death, and I feel that if I don't continue to try to use what I learned from them, they will die again. ❑

Author's note:

The author wishes to acknowledge Professor Elie Wiesel, and to thank him for reading and commenting on this article.

[1]Brown, Robert McAfee (1983). Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity. Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame Press.

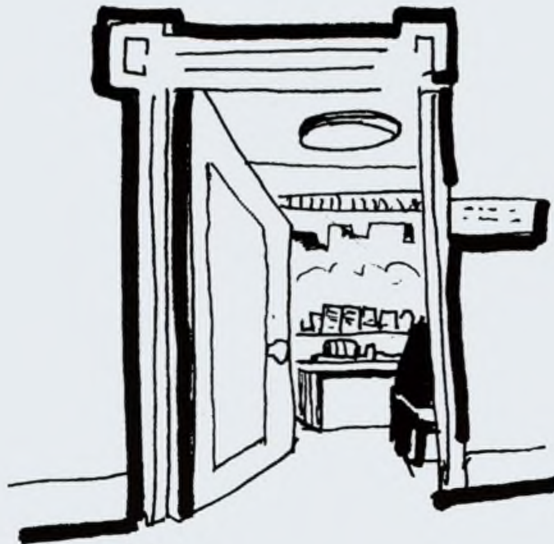
[2]I met all of the people in these vignettes while I was a case manager and program director at the Palmetto AIDS Life Support Services in Columbia, S.C., from 1988 to 1994.

[3]All names are pseudonyms except for Bill.

How I Stayed a Psychotherapist: Challenging a Taboo in Academic Social Work

By David Derezotes, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Graduate School of Social Work, University of Utah

The author recounts his efforts to bring clinical practice and the psychotherapeutic perspective into his classroom teaching and broader professional identification. He has found that clinical work has been devalued in social work education and calls for a balancing of the scientific and humanistic approaches to social work education and practice.



Following an unanticipated but gentle tap on my shoulder, I turned to see Dean Harry Specht behind me, motioning me to join him in his office down the hall.

It was the spring of 1987, and I was a first year doctoral student at the School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley. Dark thoughts filled my mind. Was I in trouble? I had spoken only briefly with Dean Specht during the two semesters I had been at Berkeley, and did not think he even knew who I was. Swallowing down the rising insecurity that seems to lurk under the surface of every student's consciousness, I walked into his office. He shut the door and told me he wanted to give me some advice.

I do not remember his every word, but the Dean said two things that challenged my thinking so effectively that they still remain clear in my memory. After noting that I identified myself in school as a psychotherapist with a decade of experience, Harry said, "You know, David, psychotherapy is the greatest hoax of the twentieth century." He then expressed concern that I had a fair number of professional interest areas: holistic medicine; direct practice with individuals, couples, families, and groups; research; and policy. He told me, "We are not training Renaissance men here at Berkeley." Being surprised and somewhat intimidated by Dr. Specht's position and authority, I was not able to respond effectively at the time.

I left the room angry. I did not realize yet that it was sometimes Harry's teaching style to be confrontational with students, and that he did care about me. I also did not yet fully appreciate how the Psychotherapist and the Renaissance Man in me were vital and interconnected parts of my professional self. All I knew was that my professional identity seemed under attack again.

I say "again" because most of the faculty seemed hostile towards psychotherapy. During the first semester, I did not have to be a Licensed Clinical Social Worker to figure out that psychotherapists were not generally held in high esteem at the school. Although most of the doctoral students would later become teaching faculty, the curriculum had no PhD-level clinical content. In class discussions, clinical observations were always seen as less legitimate than research observations: the only appropriate way of knowing was through scientific research.

Even most of the other doctoral students were generally unfriendly towards what was called "micro-level" practice. As far as I knew, I was the only doctoral student who was currently in practice with real clients. In downtown Oakland I was seeing children and parents, most of whom were clients of Alameda County DCFS. Although my clients were all poor people of color, my private practice was viewed by many as inappropriate because social workers were supposed to work only in public sector agencies doing case management or community organizing with indigent populations. To many of my peers, I was "selling out" by working in private practice.

In addition, most of the other students were already heavily invested in the traditional doctoral goal of knowing more and more about less and less. When we went around the room in the first doctoral seminar, each student shared his or her focused area of research with the group. But when it was my turn, I offered the class a list of interests that included various professional and academic perspectives. An uncomfortable silence filled the room after I spoke.

Whenever psychotherapy _was_ mentioned in the classroom, there was almost a religious fervor given to the dominant view that the best model is always cognitive-behavioral and short-term. I was learning that academic social work had its own "sacred" doctrines, rituals, and beliefs, just like any religion, and that certain other doctrines, rituals, and beliefs were considered blasphemous. The taboo that I was learning about was the one against being a psychotherapist.

The taboo seemed particularly aimed at any therapist who could also be identified as having Renaissance-like qualities. Consulting the dictionary, I discovered that a Renaissance person is someone who has diverse interests and expertise in a number of areas (The American Heritage Dictionary, 1985). Thus, a Renaissance person sounded a lot to me like a social worker, who often draws selectively from an eclectic base of many traditions and ways of knowing during the helping process.

Although I had never used the term 'Renaissance' to describe myself before, I began to realize that the ecological, generalist, and humanistic perspectives that I identified with as a social worker could also be viewed as Renaissance perspectives . For example, I was taught in my doctoral classes that the ecological or person-in-environment perspective is the hallmark of social work theory. I learned that the ecological perspective, first applied to social work practice by such pioneers as Germaine (1968) and Hartman (1970), has been useful as a "unifying framework" for the many practice strategies now available for social workers (Meyer, 1988, Dubois, 1965; von Bertalanffy, 1956). Similarly, the generalist perspective of social work also seemed like a Renaissance perspective to me in that it was said to take a broad view in assessment and to emphasize being prepared to intervene in many circumstances and on many levels (Sheafor & Landon, 1987). Finally, the humanism of Renaissance Europe can be related to the Liberal Arts requirement that most schools of social works look for in applications to the MSW program, including studies in philosophy, literature, and the fine arts.

It also seemed to me that the ecological, generalist, and humanistic perspectives taught in the classroom were often not applied to academic practice in our social work schools. I thought that if we academics better walked our talk with respect to these perspectives, then we would run our schools of social work very differently. For example, since ecological theory and science

support the body-mind-spirit connection, students and faculty could be asked to develop their hearts and bodies as well as their minds. Since the generalist framework includes the use of indirect and direct methods across populations and settings, the curriculum could view policy, community organization, case management, and psychotherapy as equally valuable areas of social work practice. Perhaps most basic, faculty could treat each other and their students more humanistically, tolerating even those we view as being intolerant. We would treat those with the least power as well as we treat those with the most power. We would promote and tenure those colleagues who make significant contributions, even those who happen to be psychotherapists.

During my doctoral program, I saw that faculty discomfort about psychotherapy seemed related to a broader discomfort with anything 'below the neck.' Psychotherapists know that human development involves growth in a number of interrelated dimensions, including the cognitive, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual (Cowley, 1993). In contrast, most academics seem to focus primarily upon the cognitive dimension of development. During my MSW program, for example, my practicum placement was at a hospice where I happened to be with a patient and his family at the moment that he died. It was the first time in my life that I had ever experienced the death of a human being, and I wanted to talk about it in my practice class. However, when I brought the subject up in class, my instructor was obviously quite uncomfortable and told me that discussions about experiences like this were inappropriate for a clinical social work class. Similarly, in my doctoral program, few students or faculty seemed to want to risk showing emotional vulnerability in the classroom.

Social work is an applied profession, and I wanted to help my students learn how to help their clients heal and grow. I had read in the library that the word "health" is itself derived from the root *hal*, which means whole. I wondered how social workers could help others heal if they were not striving to become more whole, to have all of their parts. Since faculty are teaching future social workers, it seemed that we should especially try to model multidimensional development for our students. I remember that one of the direct practice instructors in my MSW program told the class that he had no experience at all working directly with clients. He added that his lack of experience was really not important because he knew the research on practice very well. From my perspective, although he was a brilliant man, this instructor's 'head knowledge' was insufficient preparation for doing clinical instruction.

Having entered a doctoral program in my late 30's, I had developed enough of a sense of self in life to be reluctant to totally discount what I was feeling and thinking. I knew from my own clinical experience that psychotherapy can sometimes help people. I did not understand yet why so many social work faculty seemed uncomfortable with and often even hostile towards psychotherapy in social work practice.

That discomfort seemed to exist in most of the schools of social work that I interacted with following my graduation from Berkeley. For example when I was applying for my first academic position after earning my PhD, the Dean of the school recommended that I remove my ten years of experience in private practice from my vita because it 'looked bad.' After spending a full day with faculty at another university that I was interested in, the Dean there met with me in his office. As I sat across from him, he silently reviewed the reports that the faculty had written about me and then told me that the faculty was very impressed with how I had come across as a caring, empathic person who had strong clinical and teaching skills. Suddenly all puffed up with pride, I waited for him to make me a nice job offer. Instead, he said, "I don't think you would be

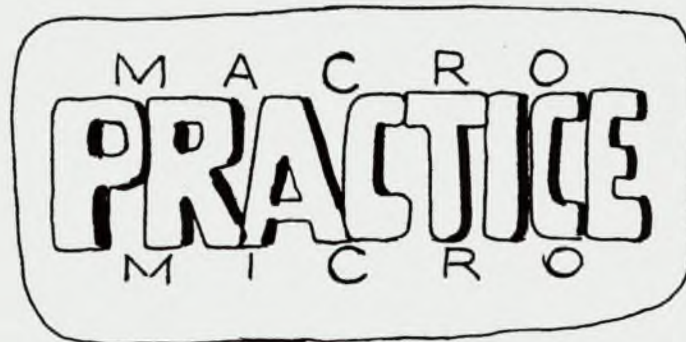
a good fit here at this school. Unfortunately, if you can stand up in front of a class and talk that is sufficient as far as teaching goes. Unless you have 18 articles by your 6th year, you would not survive...." I somehow found the strength to thank him and take my wounded self back to the motel room.

When I finally took a position and started teaching clinical social work classes, I noticed the tension that exists between a student body that is predominantly (about 98% in our school) interested in clinical direct practice and a faculty almost as universally interested in indirect practice, policy, or research. Some of my colleagues who do not teach direct practice told me that they felt that their areas of expertise were devalued by clinical students. They also tended to have common misconceptions about what direct practice and psychotherapy. Several told me that they thought that the direct practice classes taught only Freudian Psychodynamic theory and therefore misunderstood that generalist practice utilizes many models of practice. Many also equated psychotherapy with private practice serving wealthy clients, although many social workers do psychotherapy in agency settings serving the poor.

Like a good social worker, I tended to be most sympathetic with the oppressed group: clearly the students had the least power in the school and were thus the most vulnerable. Indeed once my students realized that I was not only a professor but a clinical social worker, they started telling me how difficult it was to want to be a direct practitioner or psychotherapist in the school. They told me that they heard in their initial first year classes that if they wanted to be a psychotherapist they "should look for another field to go into." Even more alarming were the comments I heard in faculty meetings that suggested that the best way to make room in the curriculum was to eliminate the core clinical classes.

When I attended meetings of other clinical social work faculty at CSWE or NASW national meetings, they would all sadly nod when they heard my stories of woe. In their schools as well, direct practice was often seen as only marginally important to the profession, and psychotherapy was seen as being even worse. Although we would all agree in those meetings that something needed to be done to support clinical students and faculty, we seemed unsure about how to proceed.

I started to feel that I especially needed to support and protect those students in my own school who want to become direct practitioners, especially those who wish to practice as psychotherapists. I realized that I deeply value how psychotherapy can uniquely help foster healthy individuals, couples, families, and communities. I shared with students the fact that there are now decades of research that support the effectiveness of psychotherapy (one of the



best summaries under one cover is still Garfield & Bergin, 1994). I starting educating my colleagues about what psychotherapy is and is not. I suggested to students that social workers may often make the best psychotherapists because of their ecological, generalist, and humanistic values.

Over the past decade, I have become increasingly convinced that psychotherapy is an essential paradigm of practice for social work for the coming millennium. In preparing this manuscript, I went first to the 19th Edition of the Encyclopedia of Social Work (1995) to review the most current thinking on psychotherapy and social work. After going through all the "P" entries in the index several times, the reality sunk in that our profession's encyclopedia does not

currently recognize the term "psychotherapy" as important enough to give the term its own heading.

The section on clinical social work did provide a historical perspective on the history and possible future of direct practice. I read in the entry that although social workers have served individuals, couples, families, and groups since the earliest days of the profession, clinical social work seems to have first emerged as a recognized specialty area in the 1950's. However, already by the 1960's, clinical social work was often criticized as being an unscientific process with weak methodologies that actually diminished the willingness of oppressed people to be involved in social protest and change (Swenson, 1995).

The evidence I read, however, suggests to me that clinical practice is becoming an increasingly important social support for people in our society and is often effective in helping the rich, the middle class, and the poor. An increasing majority of social workers continue to provide assistance to needy populations; I was impressed to learn that by 2005 an estimated 75% will be working with marginalized populations (Ginsberg, 1992).

I have also often observed that the people skills an effective psychotherapist develops are transferable to and also essential in community organization, policy implementation, administration, and research. Such skills as self-awareness and intuition, for example, have been shown to assist in leadership and community organizing (Burghardt, 1982).

So I wonder, if there are so many social workers doing ecological, generalist, and humanistic assessments and interventions in direct practice, then why do we still have the taboo against Psychotherapy in academic social work? I believe that social work is still trying too hard to prove that it is a true profession. Once largely women's work (and therefore devalued by society), social work still has a serious self-esteem problem. We are still trying to recover from having the low status associated with providing nurturing and support to people who are often most marginalized in their community. The remedy that academic social work still chooses to use to improve our collective status seems to be as scientific as possible.

Unfortunately, the solution has become the problem. Science is itself a religion with patriarchal tendencies and little tolerance for diversity. Science seems to be willing to scrutinize everything in the universe except its own assumptions. These assumptions are often still biased against what Scheafor, Horejsi, and Horejsi (1988) called the artistic factors in social work direct practice, including such vital processes as relationship, intuition, creativity, and personal style. There are pressures on academic social workers to publish in scientific journals and to teach only empirically based knowledge and skills in the classroom, leaving little room to teach the vital artistic factors necessary for effective direct practice.

When I talk with colleagues who teach university-level practice classes at other professional schools, such as schools of medicine and psychology, they tell me that their departments would not tolerate the kind of devaluing of clinical students and faculty that has become the norm in many social work schools. Ironically, those professions that seemed to be models of science to social workers at the beginning of the twentieth century now are taking the lead in recognizing again the importance of artistic factors of practice in the helping professions.

Where do we go from here? Perhaps one first step is to create opportunities for safe but honest dialogue between clinical and non-clinical social workers. Such dialogue might help erode the myths that seem to act as barriers to cooperation. Many policy-researchers in social work, for example, are social scientists with a macro-practice perspective who tend to hold the myth that psychotherapists are all naive about social problems and focused on doing only private practice with affluent clients. In contrast, clinical social workers tend to view the policy-researchers as being unable

or unwilling to practice introspection and get out of their heads. Such stereotypes can kill dialogue and often split schools of social work apart.

Another possible remedy would be the fostering of more team-teaching and team-scholarship by clinical faculty and policy-researchers. Such teams would be more likely to move away from the myths that split us apart and begin to integrate practice and research in the social work classroom and research institute. The co-authorship of articles by such teams might produce journal articles that are eagerly read by students because they are relevant and high quality. Similarly, the best model and curriculum building might be co-authored by such teams.

Finally social work, and especially academic social work, might review its tendency to value knowing more and more about less and less. Although the need for specialization will probably increase in our complex world, the most effective social workers may well continue to be ecological, generalist, and humanistic, regardless of whether they work in private practice or the research laboratory.

So thank you, Harry, for tapping me on the shoulder and challenging me to think. I hope I find increasingly effective ways to both challenge and support the students and colleagues I am fortunate enough to work with. ❑

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Movie Review: *The Straight Story*

By Agathi Glezakos, Ph.D., Department of Social Work, California State University, Long Beach

The Straight Story
Walt Disney Pictures
David Lynch, Director

"...and the gentleman over there is Mr. Aston, our new admission," said the social services designee of the Skilled Nursing Facility (SNF) where I work as a social services consultant. "We would like you to interview him today and help us with his health care plans; he is difficult to manage," she continued.

"Difficult to manage" is the most frequently stated reason for which I am asked to interview an SNF resident. Over the years, I have learned that the phrase is used to label older residents who refuse to comply with some aspect of the facility's regimen, who question the reasons for their prescribed medications, who express unhappiness over their placement, and who ask to be allowed to go home. The "difficult to manage" resident is usually an elderly man or woman who does not want to relinquish his/her right to take initiative, to make free choices, to remain autonomous and independent. In some cases, these "difficult to manage" or "non-compliant" residents suffer from physical and/or cognitive impairments and need skilled care in the institutional setting. In other cases, however, elderly individuals are admitted to SNFs without adequate preparation and with health care needs that could be met by home health care providers, or in a lower level of care facility.

Over the years, I have come to look at our practices in the treatment of older men and women critically. I now know that individual and institutional ageism continues to affect the decisions and attitudes of health care professionals. Age, rather than a careful assessment of individual capabilities and appreciation of the power of self-determination, is sometimes the criterion used to make health care and placement decisions. It was with this experience-based worldview that I entered the movie theater to watch the ***Straight Story***. The movie, skillfully directed by David Lynch, unfolds in the beautiful farm landscape of Iowa and Wisconsin.

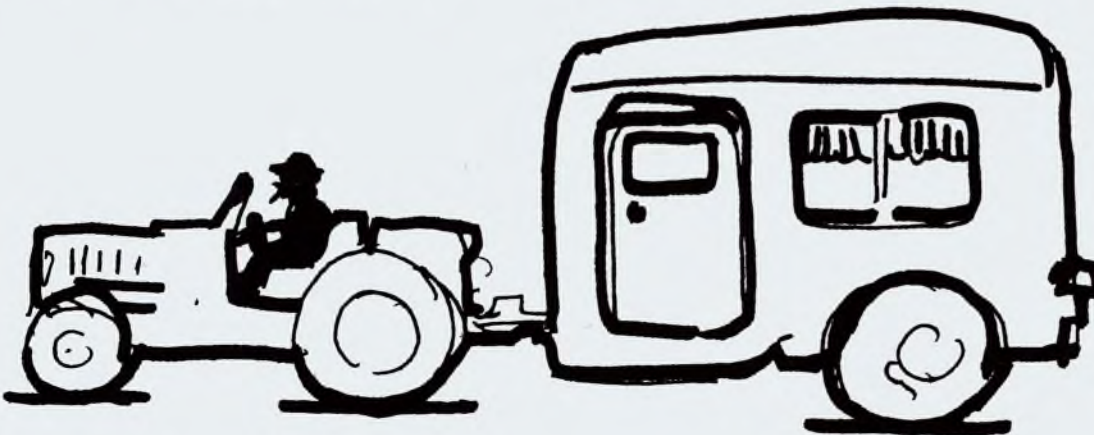
Seventy-three-year old Alvin Straight (Richard Farnsworth) has spent much of his life on the road and has "seen all that life has to dish out." He ambulates with the assistance of two canes and his general health is poor. Alvin's doctor, whom he visits reluctantly following a fall in his small house, instructs him to slow down and to

make changes to his lifestyle. But Alvin declares to the doctor and to his friends that he makes his own decisions and will choose how he will live his life. He disregards the physician's recommendations and, instead, he makes plans to visit his elderly brother in Wisconsin soon after he receives news about the latter's recent stroke. The physician does not interfere, and the townspeople nod their heads with skepticism, but they let Alvin proceed with his plan. No one calls Alvin "difficult to manage" and no one takes action to ask for an assessment of his mental capacity to make sound judgments. In Laurens, Iowa, the formal health and social services system does not seem to be part of Alvin's world.

Alin is unable to make the trip from Laurens to Mount Zion, Wisconsin, by car because of his poor vision. But he is ingenious: he makes plans to pull his trailer with his lawn mower, a 1966 John Deer model. His home town buddies find his mode of transportation non-conventional and dangerous. Some of them try to dissuade him from taking such a trip; but not Rosie (Sissy Spacek), his adult "slow" daughter who lives with him.

Though her developmental disability imposes certain limitations on her, Rosie, more than all of Alvin's developmentally "intact" friends, seems to be in sync with Robert Butler's (1998) belief that " Human beings have a fundamental right to make their own decisions… Each of these decisions represents the individual's control over his or her own life, with the understanding that the consequences may be unfortunate as well as fortunate, folly as well as wisdom. When Rosie hears her father announce "I've got to make this trip on my own," she respects his right to make his own choice, even in the face of uncertainty and risk. She understands that seeing the brother with whom he has not spoken for more than ten years because "anger and vanity mixed with liquor" estranged them is what matters the most to her father. The dance of stubbornness and acceptance between father and daughter makes the moment of Alvin's departure a powerful illustration of one person's respect of another person's right to self-determination. Alvin makes his own choice and Rosie does not complain that he is "difficult to manage."

Over the course of his long journey, Alvin remains a "sensible" old man. At the end of each day, he camps by the roadside, builds a fire, cooks his dinner, and sleeps in his trailer. He is congenial with the people whom he meets along the way. As he crosses the colorful Fall farm quilt, he shares his life—earned wisdom—with young and old alike. To a middle-aged woman who wonders if he might be concerned about his safety at a time when there is so much violence in the world, he responds with, "I fought in the trenches of WWII; why would I be afraid of the Iowa corn fields?" When a young male bicyclist asks him what is the worst thing about being old, Alvin replies: "The worst thing about getting old is remembering when you



was young." Some days later, as Alvin reminisces with a stranger-contemporary about their WWII experiences, he triggers bottled-up emotions in his companion with the statement, "Everyone is trying to forget, but I can see it in a man right away." And it is in the course of this conversation that, for the first time in his life, Alvin reveals the war secret that pushed him to drink: he had accidentally killed a fellow soldier somewhere in Germany. The verbal exchanges between the two old men and the swiftly changing expressions of their weathered, wrinkled faces in a small country bar present an impressive example of the cathartic and therapeutic effects of Life Review. I wonder whether this could have been their experience in an institutional setting!

When Alvin drives his lawn mower over a majestic Mississippi River bridge and crosses the state line into Wisconsin, he encounters strangers, each of whom provides him with pieces of the information he needs to locate his brother. A young priest, a bartender, a tractor driver, each one of them is intrigued and moved by Alvin's ingenuity and fraternal love. This "difficult to dissuade" man took the journey to complete a personal mission, and touched many lives along the way.

Alvin Straight's story is the true story of a simple, wise, insightful, and determined, if not stubborn, old man. Alvin is not affected by what others might say or think about how he chooses to live his life. In his small rural community no one seems to think that Alvin should be referred to a formal services system for an assessment of his capacity for sound judgement. He knows what matters the most to him and what will make a difference to the brother whom he claims to "know better than anyone else." From the beginning of the movie to the end, Alvin mesmerized me; watching him more than once brought to my mind Robert Mellert's (1997) statement that "...of all our obligations, the primary one is to know thyself." Can it be, I ask myself, that this "self-knowledge" pushes so many institutionalized men and women to become "difficult to manage" residents? Sissy Spacek in the role of Rosie delivers an impressive acting performance. But it is Richard Farnsworth, the aged actor playing the story's protagonist, who captivates the viewer. The years have not eroded his dramatic talent. To the contrary, his powerful performance becomes convincing evidence of how age can contribute to the refinement of a performer's acting skill. Maturity and wisdom from the actor's many and diverse life experiences seem to have enhanced his talent and deepened his insight into the nature of man. His nomination for the Academy Award came as no surprise to me.

The *Straight Story* is an old man's life narrative that should not be missed. Many lessons can be learned from it, lessons about dignity, compassion, mutually beneficial intergenerational exchanges. Above all, it loudly illustrates the need to assess carefully an older person's capacity to exercise his/her right to self-determination before labeling that person as "difficult to manage." This right is essential to the preservation of one's sense of self-worth, which ought not diminish in the presence of age-related frailties. ❑

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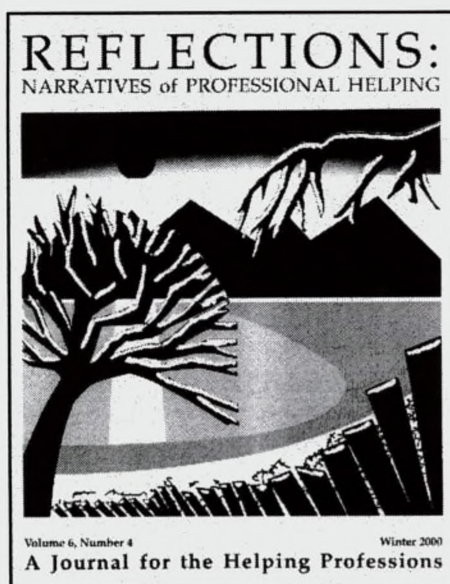

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