

Letter From the Guest Editor

by Sherrill J. Clark, Ph.D

The California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) is a coalition of the fourteen graduate deans/directors of social work, the fifty-eight welfare directors, and representatives of mental health, the National Association of Social Workers, and private foundations. The chief purpose of this project is to provide a statewide program of financial aid for graduate social work students who will commit to employment in California County Child Welfare Services. It has established a forum that allows the practice and university communities to discuss mutual concerns: the provision of the best services to vulnerable persons who rely on public social services.

CalSWEC celebrates its 10-year anniversary this year. In observance of this milestone, the De-



partment of Social Work at CSU, Long Beach, and Director John Oliver have graciously offered to devote a special issue of this journal to tell the stories of CalSWEC and its influence on social work education. I am honored to have been chosen as guest editor for this special issue.

Reflections is devoted to personal narratives. In her Letter from the Editor (Summer 1999), Editor Mary Ann Jimenez described the importance of narratives and observed, "The best narratives convey what we have been, what we are, and what we might become.... As an historian, as well as a social work educator, I have always believed that the narrative was one of the most provocative means of rousing thought, dispelling intellectual torpor, and inspiring action."

In this issue Ed Nathan describes how he and Harry Specht teamed up to draft the concept of a social work center devoted to public social services during their breakfasts at the Berkeley Faculty Club. To a large extent, it was Harry's desire to redirect social work students to work in the publicly supported social services combined with Ed's foundation and county connections that launched CalSWEC.

CalSWEC former executive directors, Bart Grossman and Nancy Dickinson, provide narratives on how CalSWEC enabled them to be catalysts for change in social work education and public social services during the sometimes frustrating process of incremental change. Bart's narrative focuses on bringing two cultures—university and agency—together to form the partnership.

Janet Black and Barbara

Cohen, respectively the former and present field directors at CSULB, discuss their involvement in a distance education program. In addition to the challenge of using technology to deliver a graduate social work curriculum, the distance education program deals with the teaching implications for nontraditional, part time students, i.e., students who are already employed by the agencies.

The students and alumni have contributed the most personal and poignant reflections. Kelly J. Thompson speaks eloquently about the events in her life that have given her a compassionate, yet realistic, view of her work. She does not pull any punches about how hard this work is. Particularly when you have to set your own boundaries. Laurel Adam and Ruth Supranovich talk about breaking the qualitative-quantitative research barrier, and in doing so, they demonstrate the common elements shared by research and practice. Several short pieces offer additional insight into diverse aspects of training, education, and practice.

Finally, Karen Ringuette, our Media Specialist, has composed a timeline of CalSWEC's history.

My personal note:

My family is precious to me. I was fortunate to be raised

by five aunts and a grandmother who used to sing to me in Russian. My youngest aunt was 14 when I was born. My father was away in the Navy. My mom, the in-law, felt overwhelmed by this busy, noisy bunch who fought over who would take care of me, the first-born granddaughter. I was never allowed to cry because the landlord who lived downstairs didn't like children. Now, I have only two aunts left and my mom. I can imagine how painful it would have been not to have known them as I was growing up. As a mother myself, I tried to give my two kids the same special feeling, but it's impossible to be seven people at once, and trying was a mistake.

Facing the fact that our son and daughter are multi-substance abusers and alcoholics was the most difficult thing my husband and I have ever done in our lives. It blind-sided us. Both my husband and I have siblings who "use or drink too much." My grandfather did not live with the family because he was an alcoholic. Three of my aunts married alcoholics; one married at least two different alcoholics. Alcohol has caused all kinds of medical and family problems in my husband's family. Nobody ever talks about it. We are not alcoholics; so we thought we had escaped this legacy. To make matters worse, in our community so many adults have this problem that the threshold of alarm (which would be indicated by what I know now as recognizing alcoholic behavior) is very high and came too late for my family to avoid a painful separation from our daughter.

Because of alcohol, our daughter was in residential treatment and foster care for nearly three years and for 2 1/2 years we were forbidden to see her, not legally, but by guilt manipulation. The probation officer in charge of her case rarely called us and, in fact, never once interviewed us in person during the entire three years. He wouldn't come to Individual Educational Plan meetings because he didn't have time for "meetings where they serve little doughnuts." He told me the reason he didn't call me was because when he did we always had long conversations and he didn't have time for that either. In spite of the fact that reunification was always the plan, we were not included. After our daughter ran away for the second time from the treatment center, they told us she needed some time off from her family problems—six months. After that they made us invisible. Things got so bad I had to call my county supervisor who called the head of the agency who got staff to take my daughter to the dentist.

So, I really do know a little about what it's like to be crushed by the system. I really do know what it's like to be viewed as the enemy, to have your telephone calls go unanswered for weeks on end, to have workers make plans without you and try to second-guess you. We were almost never heard.

During this time, through my job, I would go to the same conferences as the juvenile court judges and feel like a spy. Here I was, the bad mother, sitting in the same audience and hearing the same incantations—family-cen-

tered, strengths-based, reunification. We would nod our heads and acknowledge how important these concepts were, but when it came to getting the reunification services our family needed, no one was there. On the contrary, the probation officer delegated reunification planning to the residential treatment staff who encouraged our daughter to seek foster care instead of returning home.

Now maybe I am fooling myself, but I have something to say to you CalSWEC grads who say you can't stand working in the public agency system one more minute and want to quit because the system doesn't support your kind of social work. It's true; you have been educated to make a difference and often the system doesn't support that. We knew that going into this endeavor. That's why we have the stipend program. Agencies and schools, like families, tend to want to stay the same. Change is difficult. Nonetheless, you know how to obtain sensitive information by helping families to trust and cooperate with you. Not only are you knowledgeable about where resources are in your community, but you can show clients how to use them. You know how to do a thorough assessment of risk and to present the facts to an interdisciplinary team. You are able to evaluate your own practice and to switch if you are going the wrong way. You have empathy and self-awareness. We encouraged you to be articulate in writing as well as verbally in order to be straightforward with parents who have to change to get their kids back. We encouraged you to be the voice for families who

don't have any power because they are poor or the wrong color. Without you, more children will be lost, more families wounded. Please stay.



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