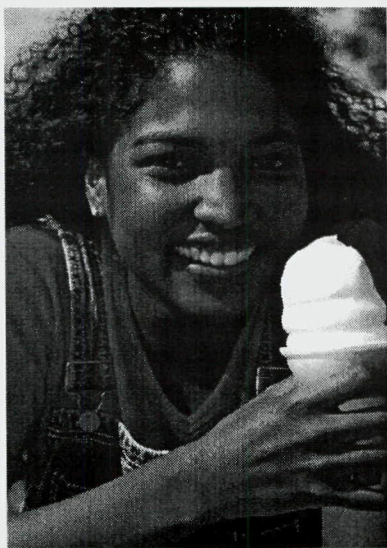


A Tapestry of Social Work Experiences Reinforces a Commitment To Ensuring the Safety and Welfare of Children

The author recounts her successful search for an occupational niche in social work.

by
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In order to discuss the path which led me to seek a career in Child Welfare, I must first talk about what led me to the social work field as a whole. After completing my BA degree in Psychology at Hampton University, I returned home to California. Not really knowing how to approach the job search situation, I started working where my older brother had made a good name, a bank. This job, working as a credit analyst, was a far cry from what I had envisioned I would be doing with my degree. After a year of the meticulous work involved in approving or denying individuals credit, I was ready for a change. My sister had just finished her BA degree and was offered a position in New York. I jumped at the chance of being free from credit reports and I moved with her.

I was working as a temporary employee doing general office work and making very little money. Out of habit, I would look in the classified ads daily during my lunch hour for more gainful and enjoyable employment. One day I saw a position for a social worker in a residential treatment center. The job description was working with pre-teen and teenage girls who had been in trouble with the law and were removed from their homes as PINS, persons in need of supervision.

The particular opening entailed working with girls who had been out of their home for some time and were preparing to be returned to their families. I thought it was a perfect match.

After my first week on the job, I was convinced I had found my niche, social work. Even though the position paid nearly the same as the temping, I had eight weeks of vacation and more benefits than I'd ever imagined. I was charged with providing services to fourteen girls, ages 11-14, and their families. The girls all lived in the transition cottage and my office, (yes office, fully equipped with a couch) was located in the back of the cottage.

I conducted group sessions with the girls, arranged counseling for the girls, planned and supervised visits with parents, and, my personal favorite, conducted home visits. The girls came from all over New York City and the home visits gave me the chance to see places I would have never ventured. I tried new ethnic cuisine. I rode urine-filled elevators; went sightseeing, mostly while lost; and even heard gunshots and saw a man running from them during a visit with a parent. Not many professions expose you to such varied adventures in a single day!

I also enjoyed the freedom this position afforded me. I was young and could enjoy the NYC nightlife, while maintaining my

responsibilities at work. My work hours were flexible and although I would many times work above and beyond traditional work hours, there were times when I could come in at 10 am, 11am, or not at all. I enjoyed forming relationships with the girls and seeing how families can use all of their resources in order to reunite the family. The idea of protecting children and preserving families was new and exciting for me. The job was demanding, challenging, and I loved it.

My supervisor was a certified social worker and wonderful mentor. Since I had no formal education in social work, she was the first person to show me the child welfare system. She provided excellent clinical supervision for not only my work with the children and families, but she also worked with me in dealing with the deprived situations, drug abuse, and violence I was seeing on the job. I remained on this job just over one year. During my last days, my supervisor encouraged me to seek a master's degree and continue in social work. I am not sure if she realizes the impact she had on me and how this, my first experience in social work, set a course in my life and has shaped my career path over the last next ten years.

As mentioned before, the money in my first social work position was not very good. And since the cost of living in New York is fairly high, I needed some way of supporting myself, which also left room for a social life. For a while I tried to work a second job, but I could not sustain the two positions for long. It was time to

find a new and higher paying job.

In my work at the residential treatment center, I would work hand-in-hand with the girls' county social workers. I had applied for two county positions at about the same time as I had accepted the previous job. The few county case managers I knew suggested I follow up on the applications I had submitted a year earlier. I was qualified to work as an eligibility worker or a child welfare worker. At the time I applied, I did not really understand the differences between the two positions.

I was called for the eligibility position first. I believed the eligibility work would be similar to the social work in the residential treatment center. I envisioned working with families, doing information and referral while helping them with their financial situation. I was wrong. The position reminded me more of the credit analyst position I had been anxious to leave. I did enjoy working with the families, but it was a punitive system. There was very little room for interpretation and the stakes were high; if you didn't follow the rules, you received no assistance.

What I enjoyed most was the county structure and work environment. The camaraderie between co-workers in the county system had not been matched in any other position I held. There were people from varied backgrounds coming together to work, and I ended up forming relationships and support systems that continued far beyond the boundaries of the workday. There was a clear delineation of author-

ity in the county and always somewhere to turn if I needed help. I worked as an eligibility worker and subsequently a fraud investigator for the next three years.

All the while I was working as an eligibility worker, I had plans of returning to school for a master's degree. I researched many programs in social work, public administration and psychology and applied to schools in each of these areas. I was accepted at the University of California at Berkeley. Berkeley's social work program was one of the best in the country, the move would bring me closer to my family, and Berkeley had a program that tied together my past experiences in social services. The Title IV-E program was exactly what I was looking for. I had no previous knowledge that it existed, but I was glad to see it come my way. It was the glue that connected my previous work history with a new direction and more focused child welfare work and, in addition, provided money for tuition and living. The choice to move was easy.

Upon graduating in 1997, I began working for Contra Costa County's Employment and Human Services Department to repay my two-year commitment. At times it felt the two years would never end and I even threatened to look for other employment once my repayment period was complete. Despite the rough times and the amount of work, the rewards in the position far outweigh the headaches and heartaches. The child welfare system can have a monumental impact on families. I have seen

women reunite with children after their children were adopted through the system. I have also seen youngsters who were raised in the foster care system graduate from college, very proud of who they are and where they come from. Unfortunately, I have also witnessed the opposite.

In September 1999, I was given the opportunity to take a leave of absence from Contra Costa County and work for CalSWEC as a training specialist. I am coordinating California's effort to standardize core training for child welfare workers throughout the state. While my main responsibilities lie in the development of the core curriculum, this position has also given me the chance to see behind the scenes, learning how the Title IV-E program came about and how it is continuing to evolve. I am seeing how social work professionals, like myself, are working to improve the child welfare system through the training of workers. I am seeing dedicated social workers that have spent many years on the front line working with families tackle flaws that are inherent in the child welfare system.

This time away from direct services has given me a chance to challenge and enhance skills I have not had the opportunity to use. It has also let me know just how much I enjoy hands-on work with families and children. I am thankful for this opportunity and would not trade it for anything, but I am also looking forward to returning to Contra Costa County in my former capacity. I miss interacting with children and par-

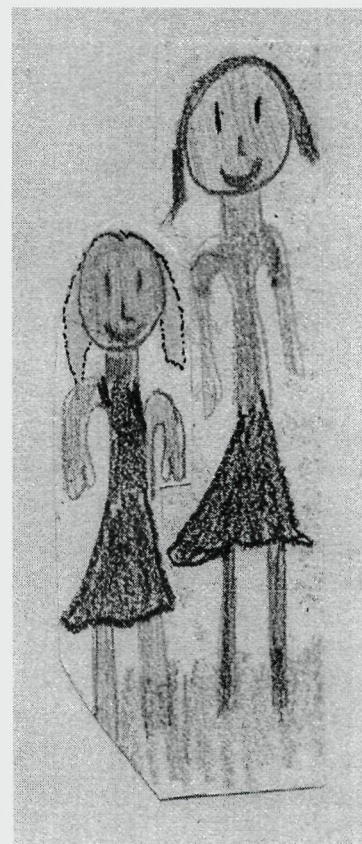
ents. I even miss trips to Court and the thousands of phone calls and thwarted "emergencies" child welfare workers deal with on a daily basis. There is something about working in the foster care system that is addictive. The high intensity of the work, the fast pace, and the thinking quickly on your feet is what I enjoy most.

From my first social work position to my current employment, each new experience in social work has built upon the last. I see career options in child welfare broadening. I have become more firm in my own convictions about the protection of children and the preservation of families. No matter the course I choose to take in the future, ensuring the safety and welfare of children will continue to be the theme throughout my career.

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About the Author

Stacie Buchanan is a 1997 graduate of the Title IV-E MSW Program at the University of California at Berkeley School of Social Welfare. She has five years of experience in public social services, two of which were with Contra Costa County Child Welfare Services, where she conducted dependency investigations. She is a training specialist at CalSWEC and project leader of the Standardized Core Curriculum Program.



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