

An MSW Student's Life: Winter 2009

Contributed by T.J. Rutherford

Editor's Note: With this issue, we welcome T.J. Rutherford, our new MSW student columnist! T.J. will share her experiences with us through this column and through our new blog at <http://blog.socialworker.com>. {mosgoogle right}

I'll always remember the day I gave in to my calling. A co-worker was in trouble with alcohol, drugs, and an abusive partner. I found myself, for what seemed the millionth time in my 49 years, counseling someone who needed help. After I referred her to the appropriate professionals, I walked back to my desk at the city magazine where I am an editor, and something inside me clicked.

This is my life's work.

For the first time, I got it. More importantly, I gave myself permission to do something about it. Growing up in an alcoholic, dysfunctional family environment, I had always run fast and far from the field of social work. I wanted to forget about it, not jump into the middle of it. I chose journalism as my undergraduate degree, and it has served me well for many years.

Over the years, however, I was pulled into the social work field. I worked in an alcohol and drug treatment center as an admissions specialist, and I worked for the Governor's Commission for a Drug-Free Indiana as a community organizer.

That defining moment in December 2007 set me onto a whole new path. From the moment I made a decision to speak with the department head of the master's social work program, doors began to fly open. Before long, I was filling out applications; scheduling, studying for, and taking the GRE; and registering for my first classes.

I was so excited. I hadn't been in college for at least 26 years (yikes!). Those years were filled with high family drama and my attempts to escape it in any way possible. To say I did not apply myself would be an understatement. The fact that I graduated with a pretty decent GPA is a mystery I still ponder. I vowed that graduate school would be my chance to shine—to do projects and assignments to the best of my ability.

My first semester in spring 2008 included Research Methods I and Social Work Practice With Individuals and Families. When I entered the classroom on the first day, I noticed I was the only White female in the room. There were five African American women, one African American man, and one White man.

The fact that I am a White woman at a historically Black university does not bother me. In fact, I believe it is enriching my education in ways I can't yet begin to articulate. The Higher Education Act of 1965 defines historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as "...any historically Black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary of Education to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation."

From the definition above, I could surmise that the principal mission is not to educate me—a White female. Suddenly I have become "the other." I need to emphasize right away that I do not feel that I am treated any differently or with any disrespect by my professors or my classmates. On the contrary; I feel as if I fit into this institution—that if I choose to concentrate on our differences rather than our many similarities, I will sabotage this amazing opportunity.

One reason I feel as if I belong is my friendship with a Black woman in my cohort. We were first paired together in practice class. We had to role play client/patient intake behavior. She was the client and I was the caseworker. It didn't matter what I said to her, she fought me. With every interview technique I employed, she shot me down. Even the professor noticed that she was being a bit tough on me and made a few comments. When we finished our assignment, she looked me in the eyes and said, "Girl, they are going to eat you up." Ouch!

By "they," she was referring to the clients I would be serving at the Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS). I have accepted a grant from DFCS, and in exchange for Title IV-E benefits, I am obligated to give back the amount of years with employment for each year of education they give me.

I'd be lying if I said that her words didn't get under my skin. The audacity, I thought. Today, I look back on that day with a wry smile for all we have been through together since then.

During the summer semester, we were the only students in both of our accelerated classes. Because of the huge demands of one of the classes, Social Welfare Policy and Services, and our constant togetherness during Saturday classes, we began to form a bond that continues to grow stronger.

Her favorite thing to say to me is, "That's because you're a White girl." She has taught me to not be afraid to ask about her culture, to not be afraid to use the words Black and African American. It's so strange when people whisper those words. I now call them on it, reminding them that they are not four-letter words!

Fall semester, we were blended into a 14-person cohort. In Cultural Diversity class, I listened and watched with disbelief as she told a story: She said that she had never had a White friend before me. I playfully punched her in the arm and said, "No way." As I looked into her face, I could see that she was telling the truth. She went on to share that her upbringing was "Black" and that her family did not have White friends. She mentioned that she'd had co-workers that were White, but they were only acquaintances.

We have had meals together; we have helped one another with homework and with emotional support. I remember being concerned about her because she commutes from a distance to classes and, because she was so tired one early morning, she almost veered off the road. I have offered our spare bedroom to her and, although she has never accepted,

the offer stands.

While I am learning a lot about becoming a social worker in my classes, the experiences with my classmates at this university may well be a deeper, richer education than I could have ever imagined.

T. J. Rutherford is in her second year of graduate school where she is earning a master's in social work. She is Assistant Editor and Web Manager for a city magazine. T. J. shares her life with her husband and a nine-year-old rescue dog.