

An MSW Student's Life: Spring 2009

Contributed by T.J. Rutherford

As I began my second year of graduate school, I knew it was going to be more challenging. With field practicum, four classes instead of the usual two, and 30 hours at the city magazine where I am an editor, I was not expecting it to be easy. What happened unexpectedly for me and my cohort was that our part-time status became full-time status without our knowledge or consent. And by now we were deep into graduate school, so in many ways we felt a bit duped and trapped. To remain on track for graduation, we had to increase our classes. We did not have a choice in the matter. {mosgoogle right}

I feared losing my job. In the current economy, I was lucky that cutting my hours at work from 40 to 30 was helpful to the bottom line. As I move forward, I will most likely not get my hours back, and that's okay with me because of the school workload, but I hadn't really planned on this happening when I still had a year and a half left in grad school.

Since there is nothing I can do about it except advocate for future part-time students, I moved through this and kept my eyes on the prize. The department recently made the announcement that this would change for the incoming part-time students from this point forward. Was I disappointed that it didn't happen for me? Of course. Should I dwell on something I cannot change? Of course not!

I started my field practicum in January 2009. It was not at the agency I had requested. I thought the perfect place for me would be at a children's advocacy center. I knew about the place and the director, and I was certain it would be a great generalist field experience for me.

My field liaison thought differently. She sent me to a TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) women's residential program. Because my field instructor works at two sites, I am also able to shadow her at a counseling center where she works with children.

What's the saying? "We plan, God laughs." And the song lyrics, "I thank God for unanswered prayers." Both of these apply to the outcome of my field practicum assignment.

Perhaps my biggest lesson this semester is about priorities. I am unable to participate in many of the activities I did prior to this schedule. I can't even really take a lunch break. And dinner is pretty much on the fly, too, these days. Haircuts, manicures, pedicures? Movies, long conversations with friends? Forget it! I rarely shop for anything that is not groceries, and even this is handled more by my husband lately.

Speaking of my husband, he has become much more self-sufficient. While he has always been a fairly equal partner in our marriage, he now does all the cooking, his own laundry, and he takes care of the dog, too. I am very grateful for his support. We try to have a nightly check-in where we lie on the bed and discuss our days and the days ahead. It helps.

I continue to be comfortable at my HBCU (Historically Black College and University). I fit in, as far as I'm concerned, and I don't have any issues with being one of very few White students. I continue to learn a lot about my culture and that of African Americans. My cohort and I have blended into the full-time classes, and we still stay in touch with one another. We have each also made new friends, and I have connected with some new people who I really enjoy and respect in the program.

My field practicum is an important part of my education. On Mondays and Thursdays, I intern at a community counseling center. On Wednesdays and Fridays, I work at a women's residential program. If I could only choose one facility to work in, I would pick the counseling center. I observe one-on-one sessions that my field instructor facilitates. She treats children, and I never thought I would love it so much. While observing, I imagine what I will incorporate of her style and what I will add of mine.

Over the years, I have participated in many healing workshops and treatment experiences, both for personal and professional reasons. I realized the other day, while listening to a young girl recount her horrific rape, that I have tools that I can pull out to use in sessions like this one. Because I am an observer now, I only discuss them with my instructor. After spring break, I will have an opportunity to counsel on my own, first with my field instructor present and then on my own. I am excited about this.

Our class went to DFCS for a visit, and several professionals from different areas of the agency shared their experiences with us. I was fascinated by the adoption department's presentation. The person who heads the department was very passionate about their work, and the idea of helping a child with a mutually agreed upon permanent placement seemed very rewarding. As with any presentation to a group of students, I am certain that we didn't hear the inside story. However, I felt as if the workers were honest with the information about investigation and diversion (or family support) that they gave us. I was impressed with the new facility and with the professionalism of the staff. It was helpful for me to be able to ask lots of questions, since I was awarded the Title IV-E grant and will be working for DFCS when I graduate. I believe it will be a great training ground for me, primarily because I have not worked in the field, other than in substance abuse-related positions.

As the semester rolls on, I am proud of myself for the hard work I am doing. I am amazed at times at all that I am accomplishing each day. I have also come to the realization that I do not want to have another semester like this one. After summer school, I need to make some decisions about my job. School is my priority now. Work is important, but not as important as school. I am struggling at times to keep my head above water. I feel stressed, and I am unable to take time out for me. I do not want to be a hypocrite to my clients when I tell them to put self first. I need to put myself first or I will not be able to do this.

I have planned a meeting with my advisor. I know she will give me some sound advice regarding how to proceed this semester and in the future. With all I am learning and doing these days, I welcome advice from those who have gone before me.

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. Read more about her day-to-day grad school experiences at THE NEW SOCIAL WORKER's blog at <http://blog.socialworker.com>.