

A Different Kind of Teacher

Contributed by Kryss Shane

I never once said that I wanted to be a social worker when I grew up.

From the first memories I have, I always believed that I was meant for something great—educating others. I loved to read and write as a child, especially poetry, and sometimes wrote stories and poems about my fated future teaching. {mosgoogle right}

All through elementary school, I believed I was going to teach, and by middle school, I was keeping a list of my teachers' assignments and behaviors so that I would be prepared when I grew up, without making the same mistakes my teachers had made. In middle school, I decided that when I was a teacher, there would be no homework and no detention. By high school, I'd decided that any student who didn't turn in their homework should get a detention. Of course, I found myself the person who many turned to for help with assignments, family issues, or dating drama, which I gladly advised on while explaining how to count protons or where to find out how many representatives are assigned to each state.

I graduated high school with a plan to attend college and then return to take over the English department of my alma mater. I think I was about two quarters into the program and three weeks into a quarter's class on British Literature when I found myself dozing off. I realized that if I couldn't sit through it for four hours each week, I surely couldn't teach it for forty years!

Having spent more than a decade in charge of a volunteer-run soup kitchen, I decided it made sense to incorporate the two ideas and teach cooking classes, which meant earning a teaching certification in Family and Consumer Sciences (formerly known as "home economics," although it now included courses in career exploration and job skills). My first experience was student teaching in an urban high school, which had a 42% attendance rate and just over a 50% graduation rate. My instructions were to observe, but I found myself placed under the eye of a cooperating teacher who was nearing retirement and who was quite eager for me to take over, as soon as I felt comfortable, which took less than one month.

Not only did I excel during classes, but soon, my classroom was the place many students came to discuss problems during their lunch periods. As weeks passed, I became frustrated with all of the lesson planning and counting the minutes until lunch time came and my classroom again filled with students eager to talk about themselves and their lives. I learned about students who dreamt of being CEOs but assumed they'd settle for being the secretary for one, those who only came to class twice each week because they had to stay home to care for younger siblings, and those whose own children were the same age as classmates' siblings. They told me of their uneducated parents who didn't believe in the worth of a diploma and of their fears for safety when walking home from work in the middle of the night. Although many of their stories were of situations that broke my heart, I enjoyed learning about the students and gaining insight into their lives. At the end of my student teaching time, I received a glowing review from my cooperating teacher, and several students cried when they knew my time with them was over.

Although successful, I found myself hating the idea of writing lesson plans and teaching material required by the Board of Education when I knew there were life skills that students were more likely to use in their daily lives. What I really wanted was to be the kind of teacher who sat and listened to students and helped them figure out what to do to get from where they were to the goals and dreams they had. I was months from earning my diploma before I knew that they called these teachers "social workers."

Fast forward a few years, and I found myself beginning graduate school, having discovered that my true passion was to focus on the listening to students rather than planning their lessons as I had as an undergraduate. I'd gotten accepted into The Ohio State University's MSW Program (in part due to the letter of recommendation from that cooperating teacher), and I believed I had a leg up on some of my classmates, as many came from backgrounds without any field experience at all. I was even placed in a setting with teenagers, further convincing me that I would again be the star pupil...except I wasn't.

When I was learning to become a teacher, I discovered that I was already prepared by many of the qualities I'd learned by being the eldest child, by enjoying public speaking, and by being quick on my feet. I already knew how to explain things in multiple ways, to command the attention of a group when I spoke, and how to avoid ever appearing as if I didn't know the answer. As a teacher (especially one who often blended in with students, as a twenty-something just barely over five feet tall), students were never to see me as weak, never to think I didn't know, never to get the chance to question my abilities. As a teacher, I was taught that letting students see you sweat gave them an opening to give them reason not to listen or comply, to never let them think you too weak to know the answer. In short, not knowing everything meant chaos was likely to ensue.

Of course, this is pretty much the exact opposite of what social workers should be taught.

So there I was, a few years later, entering my first social work field placement, armed with the memories of what a rock star I was in my previous field placement experience. I felt truly ready to dispense advice, to point people in the right direction, to get them to listen. It took several clients and some feedback from more experienced social workers before I even considered that this might not be the best approach, let alone one that followed the overall beliefs of social work practice. Rather than being the student ahead of her class, I found myself behind the others, having to unlearn the ways of a teacher and then properly learn the ways of an effective social worker. I found myself sometimes biting my tongue not to give my own opinion, not to assume I knew the answers. I struggled with this a great deal, unsure of my abilities and wondering what other certainties should be questioned.

When I first began the program, I was sure I'd breeze through, with much to offer my classmates. Now, after many mistakes and a great deal of feedback, I am learning how much my classmates, instructors, and supervisors have

to offer me. I spend a great deal of time reading and listening, working to remind myself that the strength comes in listening to clients without worrying about not knowing the answer and that the best students are those who will ask for assistance rather than being too stubborn or prideful to admit to not knowing. I've even become a bit more used to the idea of not being in the teaching field as I'd expected. It still amazes me that I've formed some of the best peer relationships in my social work classes with students who have backgrounds in equine science, criminal justice, and psychology. Rather than feeling surprised at ending up in this field, they look at their unique educational backgrounds as pieces to what will make them better social workers. It has taught me not to dwell on not becoming what I'd expected, but rather to see the original plan as another way in which my social worker repertoire is expanded, to consider that maybe what I'd originally thought was only a small part of a bigger life plan rather than veering off the path all together.

Previously, I mentioned that I enjoyed poetry as a small child. By about age six, I'd chosen one favorite poem from a collection of works by many. Each night before bed, I'd read it aloud and it wasn't long before I could recite it from memory. It was *The Junkbox* by Edgar Guest, the ending of which is this:

A human junk box is this earth
And into it we're tossed at birth,
To wait the day we'll be of worth.

Though bent and twisted, weak of will,
And full of flaws and lacking skill,
Some service each can render still.

Perhaps being a social worker was part of the plan all along.

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